

2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

President Bashar Assad has ruled the Syrian Arab Republic since 2000. The constitution mandates the primacy of Baath Party leaders in state institutions and society, and Assad and Baath party leaders dominate all three branches of government as an authoritarian regime. An uprising against the government that began in 2011 continued throughout the year. The 2014 presidential election and the 2016 parliamentary elections resulted in the election of Assad and 200 People's Council (Syrian parliament) seats for the Baath Party-led National Progressive Front, respectively. Both elections took place in an environment of widespread government coercion, and many Syrians residing in opposition-held territory did not participate in the elections. Observers did not consider the elections free or fair.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the uniformed military, police, and state security forces but did not maintain effective control over foreign and domestic military or paramilitary organizations. These progovernment forces included Russian armed forces, Hizballah, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and nonuniformed progovernment militias, such as the National Defense Forces.

Government and progovernment forces launched a massive assault on the Damascus suburbs of eastern Ghouta, culminating in the government's recapture in April of an area it had besieged since 2013. The assault by the government and progovernment forces involved use of heavy weapons, likely use of chemical weapons, and deliberate denial of humanitarian aid. Government and progovernment forces launched an assault on opposition-controlled areas of Daraa Province, considered the cradle of the revolution that began in 2011, and reasserted government control in July. The assault killed hundreds of civilians and displaced hundreds of thousands.

Human rights issues included reports of unlawful or arbitrary killings by the government, including those involving the repeated use of chemical weapons, including chlorine and other substances; enforced disappearances; torture, including torture involving sexual violence; arbitrary detention; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including denial of medical care; prisoners of conscience; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; undue restrictions on free expression, including restrictions on the press and access to the internet, including censorship and site blocking; substantial suppression of the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; severe suppression of religious freedom; undue restrictions on freedom of movement; restrictions on political participation; high-level and widespread corruption; unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers by the government and other armed actors; trafficking in persons;

criminalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) status or conduct; violence and severe discrimination targeting LGBTI persons; and severe restrictions on workers' rights.

The government took no steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, or punish officials who committed human rights violations or abuses. Impunity was pervasive and deeply embedded in the security forces and elsewhere in the government.

Government-linked paramilitary groups reportedly engaged in frequent violations and abuses, including massacres, indiscriminate killings, kidnapping civilians, arbitrary detentions, and rape as a war tactic. Government-affiliated militias, including the terrorist organization Lebanese Hizballah, supported by Iran, repeatedly targeted civilians.

There were reports that armed opposition groups carried out what were characterized as indiscriminate attacks in the battle in eastern Ghouta and that they arbitrarily arrested and tortured civilians in Douma. Syrian opposition groups supported by the Turkish government reportedly looted and confiscated homes belonging to Kurdish residents in Afrin.

Some Kurdish forces reportedly unlawfully restricted the movement of persons in liberated areas and arbitrarily arrested some local civil council leaders, teachers, and other civilians. Elements affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minorities that included members of the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG), reportedly engaged in forced conscription, to include limited conscription of children. In September the SDF issued a military order banning the recruitment of anyone younger than age 18 and ordering their military records office to verify the ages of those currently enlisted.

Armed terrorist groups, such as the al-Qa'ida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), also committed a wide range of abuses, including massacres, unlawful killings, bombings, and kidnappings; unlawful detention; torture; and forced evacuations from homes based on sectarian identity. ISIS lost the majority of territory it once controlled, limiting its ability to subject large populations to human rights violations. Although severely weakened, ISIS attacked members of religious minority groups and subjected women and girls to routine rape, forced marriages, sexual slavery, human trafficking, and murder.

Russian forces were reportedly implicated in the deaths of civilians resulting from air strikes characterized as indiscriminate, particularly during support of the government's military campaigns in the Damascus suburbs of eastern Ghouta, including Douma.

Foreign forces fighting ISIS were implicated in civilian casualties reportedly in Afrin and Raqqa.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were numerous reports the government and its agents, as well as other armed actors, committed arbitrary or unlawful killings in relation to the conflict (see section 1.g.).

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the conflict had killed at least 222,000 civilians from 2011 until September, including almost 6,400 civilians from January through October. The government continued its use of helicopters and airplanes to conduct aerial bombardment and shelling. The government continued to torture and kill persons in detention facilities. The UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) reported that the government assault on eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, killed hundreds of persons, with the SNHR reporting that more than 2,600 civilians died in eastern Ghouta in February and March. In June government and progovernment forces attacked the southwest Daraa governorate, with multiple sources reporting more than 230 civilian deaths.

Government and progovernment forces reportedly attacked civilians in hospitals, residential areas, schools, and settlements for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugee camps; these attacks included bombardment with improvised explosive devices, commonly referred to as “barrel bombs,” in addition to the use of chemical weapons. It used the massacre of civilians, as well as their forced displacement, rape, starvation, and protracted sieges that occasionally forced local surrenders, as military tactics.

Other actors in the conflict also were implicated in extrajudicial killings (see section 1.g.).

On November 23, unidentified gunmen assassinated activists and journalists, Raed Faris and Hamud Junaid, in Idlib Province. Faris and Junaid were prominent civilian leaders of the peaceful revolution that began in 2011. They spoke out against the abuses of the government and of the extremist elements of the opposition. As of late November, no group had taken responsibility for the assassinations, although media reports suggested an extremist group was responsible.

b. Disappearance

There were numerous reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. The UN COI reported the number of forced disappearances remained high. Human rights groups’ estimates of the number of disappearances since 2011 varied widely, but all estimates pointed to disappearances as a common practice. In August the SNHR attributed 86 percent of the estimated 95,000 forced disappearances from 2011 until August to the government. The government reportedly targeted critics, specifically journalists, medical personnel, antigovernment protesters, their families, and associates. The majority of disappearances reported by activists, human rights observers, and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) appeared to be politically motivated, and a number of prominent political prisoners remained missing (see section 1.e.).

In July the government began publishing notifications of thousands of deaths of detainees in government detention facilities. The SNHR reported the number of detainees certified as dead was unknown but estimated it to be in the thousands. The government did not announce publication of notifications on updated state registers. According to media reports, many families were unaware of the status of their detained family members and discovered relatives they believed to be alive had died months or years earlier.

For example, in 2011 the Air Force Security Branch detained Yahya Shurbaji, an activist known for his promotion of nonviolent protest. Shurbaji's health and whereabouts remained unknown until July when his family received confirmation that he died at Sednaya Prison in 2013. The government claimed Shurbaji died of natural causes, but he shared the same date of death with at least three other detainees at Sednaya Prison, the subject of numerous reports of torture and extrajudicial killings since 2011.

The COI reported that fears of arbitrary arrests and detention prevented IDPs from returning to their homes in areas retaken by government forces. The COI noted that the families of disappeared persons often feared to approach authorities to inquire about the locations of their relatives; those who did so had to pay large bribes to learn the locations of relatives or faced systematic refusal by authorities to disclose information about the fate of disappeared individuals.

Armed groups not affiliated with the government also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected government affiliates, journalists, and activists (see section 1.g.).

The government made no efforts to prevent, investigate, or punish such actions.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment and provides up to three years' imprisonment for violations. Human rights activists, the COI, and local NGOs, however, reported thousands of credible cases of government authorities engaging in frequent torture and abuse to punish perceived opponents, including during interrogations. Observers reported most cases of torture or mistreatment occurred in detention centers operated by each of the government's security service branches. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the COI reported regular use of torture against perceived government opponents at checkpoints and government facilities run by the Air Force, Political Security Division, General Security Directorate, and Military Intelligence Directorate. They identified specific detention facilities where torture occurred, including: the Mezzeh airport detention facility; Military Security Branches 215, 227, 235, 248, and 291; Adra and Sednaya Prisons; the Harasta Air Force Intelligence Branch; Harasta Military Hospital; Mezzeh Military Hospital 601; and Tishreen Military Hospital.

The COI also reported that the Counterterrorism Court (CTC) and courts-martial relied on forced confessions and information acquired through torture to obtain convictions. A large number of torture victims reportedly died in custody. The SNHR reported that more than 14,000 individuals died due to torture between 2011 and September and attributed approximately 99 percent of these cases to government forces (see section 1.a.). The SNHR attributed to the government more than 930 deaths due to torture in the first nine months of the year. Activists maintained that many instances of abuse went unreported. Some declined to allow reporting of their names or details of their cases due to fear of government reprisal.

The COI noted torture methods remained consistent. These included beatings on the head, bodies, and soles of feet (falaqua) with wooden and metal sticks, hoses, cables, belts, whips, and wires. Authorities also reportedly sexually assaulted detainees; administered electric shocks, including to their genitals; burned detainees with cigarettes; and placed them in stress positions for prolonged periods of time. A substantial number of detainees reported being handcuffed and then suspended from the ceiling or a wall by their wrists for hours.

Other reported methods of physical torture included removing nails and hair, stabbings, and cutting off body parts, including ears and genitals. Numerous human rights organizations reported other forms of torture, including forcing objects into the rectum and vagina, hyperextending the spine, and putting the victim onto the frame of a wheel and whipping exposed body parts. Additionally, officers reportedly continued the practice of shabeh, in which they stripped detainees naked, hung them for prolonged periods from the ceiling, and administered electrical shocks. In August *Deutsche Welle* reported the experiences of Mizyed Khalid Tahad, a regime prisoner who detailed his torture during detention at Sednaya during 2012-13, including electric shock, shabeh, beatings, lashings with a pipe, being squeezed into a tire, and malnourishment. During the year NGOs, including (Amnesty International) AI, Urnammu for Justice and Human Rights (Urnammu), and Save the Rest continued to report that large numbers of detainees at Sednaya Military Prison died after repeated torture and deprivation of food, water, ventilation, medicine, and medical care.

There is no indication government use of psychological torture decreased. One commonly reported practice was detention of victims overnight in cells with corpses of previous victims. The SNHR reported psychological torture methods included forcing prisoners to witness the rape of other prisoners, threatening the rape of family members (in particular female family members), forcing prisoners to undress, and insulting prisoners' beliefs. For example, in March the COI reported a 2014 incident in which a government officer in Damascus took two girls, held their faces down on the desk, and raped them in turn. The girls reportedly tried to resist. The officer then reportedly told a male detainee, "You see what I am doing to them? I will do this to your wife and daughter."

The COI and various NGOs, including HRW, AI, and the SNHR, continued to report widespread instances of rape and sexual abuse, including of minors. In March the COI reported government forces and affiliated militias raped and sexually abused women and girls, as well as men occasionally, during ground operations, house raids, and at

checkpoints. One such example in the March COI report is that of a survivor of the al-Houla (Homs) massacre in 2012, who described how government forces entered her home and raped her daughter in front of her and her husband before shooting both her daughter and husband. Two soldiers then reportedly raped the mother.

The COI stated that government authorities subjected women and girls in detention to rape and gang rape in 20 government political and military institutions, while authorities raped men and boys and sometimes mutilated their genitals in 15 such branches. The March COI report detailed how in one such case at Branch 215 in 2012, an 18-year-old man from Daraa was severely beaten, threatened with the rape of his sisters, and then gang raped by five officers. One of the officers reportedly raped the detainee five more times over a month before authorities transferred the detainee to another detention facility. In another case the March COI report detailed how, over 10 consecutive days at the Hama State Security Branch in 2012, two officers, one of whom was a lieutenant colonel, raped two female detainees next to one another. On one occasion the same two officers reportedly raped the women in front of two naked male detainees whose hands and feet were tied in the shabeh position. In March the COI reported cases in 2012 in which perpetrators exploited blood relations by forcing male relatives to have intercourse with one another at the Damascus Political Intelligence Branch.

There were widespread reports that government security forces engaged in abuse and inhuman treatment of prisoners. According to the COI, most were civilians initially held at checkpoints or taken prisoner during military incursions. While the majority of accounts concerned male detainees, there were increased reports of female detainees suffering abuse in government custody. The COI assessed in March that the frequency, duration, and severity of the reported abuse suggested victims' sustained long-term psychological and physical damage.

The COI reported that, beginning in 2011 and continuing throughout the conflict, security forces subjected detainees to mistreatment in military hospitals, often obstructing medical care or exacerbating existing injuries as a technique in abuse and interrogation. There were numerous reports of deaths in custody at the Mezzeh airport detention facility, Military Security Branches 215 and 235, and Sednaya Prison. Authorities consistently directed families of detainees seeking information to the Qaboun Military Police and Tishreen Military Hospital. In most cases authorities reportedly did not return the bodies of deceased detainees to their families. In July the government confirmed the death of activist Islam Dabbas in 2013 in Sednaya Prison, but they did not return his body.

There continued to be a significant number of reports of abuse of children by the government. The COI noted regular reports of detention and torture of children younger than age 13, in some cases as young as 11, in government detention facilities. Officials reportedly targeted and tortured children because of their familial relations, or assumed relationships, with political dissidents, members of the armed opposition, and activist groups. In March the UN Human Rights Council held a high-level panel discussion on human rights violations against children in Syria at which NGOs presented evidence of such abuses. The UN special representative for children and armed conflict reported that

child detainees, largely boys, suffered similar or identical methods of torture practiced on adults. A May report from Urnammu, a NGO that focuses on the Syrian conflict, on abuses against children described usage of a torture wheel, shabeh, lynchings, beatings, rape, and forced sexual acts among children, among other abuses. For example, a May report from Urnammu detailed the experiences of Hamed, who was 15 years old when detained in 2014 in the Political Security branch in Latakia. Hamed described being tied to a torture wheel and being forced to confess to hiding weapons and tunneling, then being transferred to the Criminal Security branch where he reportedly was beaten and threatened with being shot. According to reliable witnesses, authorities continued to hold a number of children to compel parents and other relatives associated with opposition fighters to surrender to authorities.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions remained harsh and in many instances were life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical and psychological abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care.

Physical Conditions: Prison facilities were grossly overcrowded. Authorities commonly held juveniles, adults, pretrial detainees, and convicted prisoners together in inadequate spaces. The COI reported in March that authorities continued to hold children in prison with adults. In a report released in May, Urnammu documented the detention of more than 2,400 children, while the SNHR reported the regime detained more than 7,000 children from the start of the conflict in 2011 until March and more than 200 children during the first half of the year.

According to the COI, government detention facilities lacked food, water, space, hygiene, and medical care. Poor conditions were so consistent that the COI concluded they reflected state policy.

According to local and international NGOs, the government held prisoners and detainees in severely cramped quarters with little or no access to toilets, hygiene, medical supplies, or adequate food. In March the COI reported detainees in government detention facilities subsisted in severely inhuman conditions. A February COI report stated that authorities kept detainees in government facilities in overcrowded cells, lacking adequate sanitation, and suffering from lice infestations. In August CNN reported that malnourishment and denial of medical treatment continued to lead to the deaths of detainees.

Reports from multiple international NGO sources continued to suggest there were also many informal detention sites and that authorities held thousands of prisoners in converted military bases and in civilian infrastructure, such as schools and stadiums, and in unknown locations. Activists asserted the government also housed arrested protesters in factories and vacant warehouses that were overcrowded and lacked adequate sanitary facilities.

In some cases authorities transferred detainees from unofficial holding areas to intelligence services facilities. Detention conditions at security and intelligence service facilities continued to be the harshest, especially for political or national security prisoners. Facilities lacked proper ventilation, lighting, access to potable water or adequate food, medical staff and equipment, and sufficient sleeping quarters.

Inside prisons and detention centers, the prevalence of death from disease remained high due to unsanitary conditions and the withholding of food, medical care, and medication. Local NGOs and medical professionals reported authorities denied medical care to prisoners with pre-existing health needs, such as diabetes, asthma, and breast cancer, and denied pregnant women any medical care. Authorities retaliated against prisoners who requested attention for the sick. Released prisoners commonly reported sickness and injury resulting from such conditions. The May report from Urnammu included the example of Ali, a 14-year-old from Aleppo, who was arrested in 2014 and held incommunicado for 10 months. Ali described the abuse of a fellow child detainee, “B.K.” from Kafer Yabos, who authorities tortured until he could no longer control his bodily functions. Ali said B.K.’s entire body was infected and that the other young detainees cared for him, fed him, and cleaned him and his wounds until he died.

Information on conditions and care for prisoners with disabilities was unavailable.

Conditions in detention centers operated by various opposition groups were not well known, but the COI and local NGOs reported accounts of arbitrary detention, torture, inhuman treatment, and abuse. According to the COI, conditions in detention center run by nonstate actors such as HTS and ISIS violated international law (see section 1.g.).

Administration: There were no credible mechanisms or avenues for prisoners to complain or submit grievances, and authorities routinely failed to investigate allegations or document complaints or grievances. Activists reported there was no ombudsman to serve on behalf of prisoners and detainees. The law provides for prompt access to family members, but NGOs and families reported inconsistent application of the law, with some families waiting years to see relatives. The government continued to detain thousands of prisoners without charge and incommunicado in unknown locations.

In areas where government control was weak or nonexistent, localized corrections structures emerged. Reports of control and oversight varied, and both civilian and religious leaders were in charge of facility administration. Former police forces or members of armed opposition groups operated facilities in areas under the control of opposition forces. Nonstate actors often did not understand due process and lacked sufficient training to run facilities.

Independent Monitoring: The government prohibited independent monitoring of prison or detention center conditions, and diplomatic and consular officials had no greater access than in previous years. AI, for example, has attempted with little success to engage Syrian authorities on human rights concerns, including torture and other mistreatment, enforced disappearances, and deaths in custody, through various means since 2011. For

example, in January 2017 AI sent a letter to authorities requesting clarifications regarding the numerous allegations documented in their report “Human Slaughter House,” and in February 2017 the government denied the claims.

Some opposition forces invited the COI to visit facilities they administered and allowed some international human rights groups, including HRW, to visit. The International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent continued to negotiate with all parties, except ISIS, to gain access to detention centers across the country but was unable to gain access to any government-controlled facilities during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, but a 2011 decree allows the government to detain suspects for up to 60 days without charge if suspected of “terrorism” and related offenses. The law provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, but the government did not observe this requirement.

Arbitrary arrests continued according to local news sources, and several human rights organizations reported arbitrary detentions in the tens of thousands. The SNHR reported government forces and progovernment militias were responsible for more than 3,200 cases of arbitrary arrest in the first half of the year. Between the start of the conflict in 2011 and March, the SNHR reported almost 119,000 arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances; it attributed almost 90 percent of such cases to the government. A March COI report stated that government forces and affiliated militias continued to detain tens of thousands of persons arbitrarily or unlawfully in official and makeshift detention facilities. Government authorities held the vast majority without due process or access to legal representation or to their families. Victims endured brutal torture, and many died in detention or authorities summarily executed them. The COI report also concluded, “acts amounted to the crimes against humanity of extermination, murder, rape or other forms of sexual violence, torture, and imprisonment in the context of its widespread and systematic detentions. They have also amounted to the war crimes of murder, cruel treatment, torture, rape, sexual violence, and outrages upon personal dignity.”

HRW reported the government continued to use counterterrorism law to arrest and convict nonviolent activists on charges of aiding terrorists in trials that violated basic due process rights. Although authorities reportedly brought charges under the guise of countering violent militancy, allegations included peaceful acts such as distributing humanitarian aid, participating in protests, and documenting human rights abuses.

Government security forces failed to respond to or protect large regions of the country from violence. In February the COI reported some armed opposition groups maintained makeshift detention sites to hold civilians. The COI reported the SDF claimed to have detained nearly 1,400 terrorist fighters, the majority of whom were ISIS members but also included women and children associated with ISIS (see section 1.g.).

ROLE OF THE POLICE AND SECURITY APPARATUS

The government's multiple security branches traditionally operated autonomously with no defined boundaries between their areas of jurisdiction. Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence reported to the Ministry of Defense, the Political Security Directorate reported to the Ministry of Interior, and the General Intelligence Directorate reported directly to the Office of the President. The Interior Ministry controlled the four separate divisions of police: emergency police, traffic police, neighborhood police, and riot police. Government-affiliated militia, such as the National Defense Forces (NDF), integrated with other government-affiliated forces and performed similar roles without defined jurisdiction.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the uniformed military, police, and state security forces, but did not maintain effective control over foreign and domestic military or paramilitary organizations. These included Russian armed forces, Hizballah, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and nonuniformed progovernment militias, such as the NDF. Impunity continued to be a widespread problem. The General Command of the Army and Armed Forces may issue arrest warrants for crimes committed by military officers, members of the internal security forces, or customs police during their normal duties; military courts must try such cases. Nevertheless, security forces operated independently and generally outside the control of the legal system. There were no known prosecutions or convictions of security force personnel for abuse or corruption and no reported government actions to increase respect for human rights by the security forces.

Opposition forces established irregularly constituted courts and detention facilities in areas under their control, which varied greatly in organization and adherence to the rule of law. Some groups upheld the country's law, while others followed a 1996 draft Arab League Unified Penal Code based on sharia or implemented a mix of customary law and sharia. The experience, expertise, and credentialing of opposition judges and religious scholars also varied widely, and dominant armed militias in the area often subjected them to their orders.

ISIS claimed that it based administration of justice in the territory it controlled on sharia. As detailed by the *New York Times*, ISIS reportedly authorized its police forces, known as "Hisbah," to administer summary punishment for violations of ISIS' morality code.

ARREST PROCEDURES AND TREATMENT OF DETAINEES

The law generally requires a warrant for arrest in criminal cases, but police often cited emergency or national security justifications for acting without a warrant, which was permitted under the law. Police usually brought arrested individuals to a police station for processing and detention until a trial date was set. The law limits the length of time authorities may hold a person without charge to 60 days, but according to various NGOs, activists, and former detainees, police held many individuals for longer periods or indefinitely. Civil and criminal defendants have the right to bail hearings and possible release from pretrial detention on their own recognizance, but the government applied the law inconsistently. At the initial court hearing, which can be months or years after the

arrest, the accused may retain an attorney at personal expense or the court may appoint an attorney, although authorities did not assure lawyers access to their clients before trial. According to local human rights organizations, denial of access to a lawyer was common.

In cases involving political or national security offenses, authorities reportedly often made arrests in secret, with cases assigned in an apparently arbitrary manner to the CTC, courts-martial, or criminal courts. The government reportedly detained suspects incommunicado for prolonged periods without charge or trial and denied them the right to a judicial determination of their pretrial detention. In most cases authorities reportedly did not inform detainees of charges against them until their arraignment, often months or years after their arrest. Security detainees did not have access to lawyers before or during questioning, or throughout preparation and presentation of their defense.

The government often reportedly failed to notify foreign governments when it arrested, detained, released, or deported their citizens, especially when the case involved political or national security charges. The government also failed to provide consular access to foreign citizens known to be in its prisons and, on numerous occasions, claimed these individuals were not in its custody or even in the country.

Arbitrary Arrest: Security forces continued previous practices of arbitrary arrests, and detainees had inconsistent legal redress. Reports continued of security services arresting relatives of wanted persons to pressure individuals to surrender. Police rarely issued or presented warrants or court orders before an arrest. According to reports, the security branches secretly ordered many arrests and detentions. Activists and international humanitarian organizations stated that government forces continued to conduct security raids in response to antigovernment protests. In areas under government control, security forces engaged in arbitrary arrests. For example, the SNHR reported that on June 21, government forces raided a residence in the Jaloub al Mal'ab neighborhood of Hama, arrested 11 civilians, including two women and three children, and took them to an undisclosed location. The COI reported in March that authorities continued to arrest men and boys arbitrarily at some checkpoints. Often authorities cited no reason for arresting civilians.

Checkpoints operated by the government were a commonly reported location for arbitrary arrests, sometimes resulting in transfer to a long-term detention facility or disappearance. Government military and security forces reportedly arrested men at checkpoints solely for being of military age. According to the COI, there continued to be frequent accounts of enforced disappearances following arrest at checkpoints.

Multiple reports from local and international NGOs stated that the government prevented the majority of those detained from contacting their relatives or obtaining a lawyer. When authorities occasionally released detainees, it was often without any formal judicial procedures. Hundreds of detainees interviewed by human rights groups stated they had been arrested, detained, questioned, often tortured, and released after months or years of detention without seeing a judge or being sentenced.

There also were instances of nonstate armed groups reportedly engaging in arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention (see section 1.g.).

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention remained a serious problem. Authorities reportedly held thousands of detainees incommunicado for months or years before releasing them without charge or bringing them to trial. A shortage of available courts and lack of legal provisions for speedy trial or plea bargaining contributed to lengthy pretrial detentions. In previous years there were numerous reported instances when the length of detention exceeded the sentence for the crime. Percentages for prison/detainee population held in pretrial detention and the length of time held were not available during the year. Syrian human rights groups continued to highlight the plight of detainees and advocate for their release.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: By law persons arrested or detained regardless of whether on criminal or other grounds are entitled to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention and any delay in obtaining judicial process. If the court finds that authorities detained persons unlawfully, they are entitled to prompt release or compensation or both. Few detainees, however, had the ability to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a court or obtain prompt release and compensation for unlawful detention.

Amnesty: In October the government granted amnesty to army deserters and civilians who avoided military duty, provided they reported for duty within four months if inside Syria and within six months if outside the country. The amnesty does not cover fighting against the government or joining the opposition, regarded by the government as terrorists. Media reported that refugees were skeptical, fearing forced conscription and imprisonment. Limited releases of detainees occurred within the framework of localized settlement agreements with the government. During the year there were increasing reports of government forces violating prior amnesty agreements by conducting raids and arrest campaigns concentrated against civilians and former affiliates of armed opposition factions in areas that previously signed settlement agreements with the government. For example, the SNHR reported that on August 14, government forces arrested 80 civilians in the al Lajat suburbs of Daraa.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but authorities regularly subjected courts to political influence and prosecutors and defense attorneys to intimidation and abuse. Outcomes of cases with political context appeared predetermined, and defendants could sometimes bribe judicial officials and prosecutors. Government authorities detained without access to fair public trial tens of thousands of individuals, including those associated with NGOs, human rights activists, journalists, relief workers, religious figures, and medical providers.

TRIAL PROCEDURES

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial but not necessarily a public trial. The judiciary generally did not enforce this right, and the government did not respect judicial independence.

The constitution presumes defendants innocent until proven guilty, but numerous reports indicated that the CTC or courts-martial did not respect this right. Defendants have the right to prompt, detailed notification of the charges against them with interpretation as necessary, although authorities did not verifiably enforce this right, and a number of detainees and their families reported that the accused were unaware of the charges against them. Trials involving juveniles or sexual offenses, or those referred to the CTC or courts-martial, are held in camera. The law entitles defendants representation of their choice, but it does not permit legal representation for defendants accused of spying; the courts appoint lawyers for indigents. Defense attorneys often lacked adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense, as the International Legal Assistance Consortium (ILAC) and other NGOs reported authorities arbitrarily assigned defense attorneys to many defendants at the courthouse on the day of trial. Human rights lawyers reported that in some politically charged cases, the government provided prosecution case files to defense lawyers that did not include any evidence, if they provided anything at all. Defendants may present witnesses and evidence and confront the prosecution or plaintiff witnesses, but authorities often did not respect this right. Defendants may not legally be compelled to testify or confess guilt, but family members and NGOs routinely reported that judges accepted confessions of guilt elicited through torture or intimidation, as described in a March report by the COI and a May report by Urnammu. Convicted persons may appeal verdicts to a provincial appeals court and ultimately to the Court of Cassation.

The COI, AI, ILAC, and others have reported the lack of due process in the CTC and courts-martial. In trials reportedly lasting between one and three minutes, judges reportedly used coerced confessions obtained through torture as often the only evidence to sentence prisoners to summary execution. Multiple sources alleged the government killed as many as 50 detainees per day at Sednaya Prison, since 2011. AI reported in 2017 that at Sednaya Prison an execution panel including the director of Sednaya, the military prosecutor of the court-martial, and a representative from the intelligence agencies met prisoners sentenced to death by one of two courts-martial in the al-Qaboun neighborhood of Damascus, and then prison guards immediately hanged the prisoners. Although the government denied using a crematorium to dispose of prisoners, the government failed to return the bodies of thousands of deceased prisoners after releasing death notices during the year.

Not all citizens enjoyed these rights equally, in part because interpretations of religious law provide the basis for elements of family and criminal law and discriminate against women. Some personal status laws apply sharia regardless of the religion of those involved. Additionally, media and NGO reports suggested the government denied some, and in certain cases all, of these protections to those accused of political crimes, violence against the government, or providing humanitarian assistance to civilians in opposition-held areas. Sentences for persons accused of antigovernment activity tended to be harsh, if they reached trial, with violent and nonviolent offenders receiving similar punishments.

For example, the government arrested internet activist Bassel Khartabil in March 2012. He was held for nine months of incommunicado detention, then subsequently moved to Adra Prison in Damascus, where his family was allowed to visit him. In October 2015 authorities moved Bassel to an unknown destination where he was later sentenced to death. According to the SNHR, the majority of those tried received five- to 20-year prison sentences. The government did not permit defendants before the CTC to have effective legal representation. Although activists reported individuals charged under the counterterrorism law could retain attorneys to move their trial date, according to the ILAC, authorities did not allow them to speak during proceedings or retain copies of documents on the court's file.

In opposition-controlled areas, legal or trial procedures varied by locale and the armed group in control. Local human rights organizations reported that local governing structures assumed these responsibilities. HRW reported that civilians administered these processes employing customary sharia laws in some cases and national laws in others. Sentencing by opposition sharia councils sometimes resulted in public executions, without an appeals process or visits by family members.

According to local NGOs, opposition-run sharia councils continued to discriminate against women, not allowing them to serve as judges or lawyers or to visit detainees.

In the territories they controlled, Kurdish authorities created a legal code based on the "Social Charter." Reports described the Social Charter as a mix of Syrian criminal and civil law with laws concerning divorce, marriage, weapons ownership, and tax evasion drawn from EU law, but without certain fair trial standards—such as the prohibition on arbitrary detention, the right to judicial review, and the right to appoint a lawyer—that are customary in western judicial systems. The justice system consisted of courts, legal committees, and investigative bodies. In May Urnammu reported arbitrary arrests increased and that some opponents of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and their families were forcibly disappeared (see section 1.g.).

In March and August, the COI reported that HTS reportedly denied those arrested the opportunity to challenge in its sharia courts the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention, permitted confessions obtained through torture, and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families.

In the decreasing amount of territory it controlled, ISIS reportedly established courts to preside over its interpretation of sharia headed by judges with varied credentials. In February the COI reported that ISIS detained civilians in areas under its control accused of violating its rules or suspected of cooperating with enemy forces, members of minority religious groups, journalists, and activists accused of reporting on violations by the group, and frequently conducted public executions without proper judicial proceedings.

POLITICAL PRISONERS AND DETAINEES

There were numerous reports of political prisoners and detainees.

AI and other NGOs reported the systematic arrest of tens of thousands of citizens since 2011. At greatest risk were those perceived to oppose the government, including peaceful demonstrators, human rights activists, and political dissidents and their families. The four government intelligence agencies—Air Force Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Political Security, and General Intelligence—were responsible for most such arrests and detentions.

AI reported that the total number of political prisoners and detainees was difficult to determine in view of the lack of government information and absence of government transparency. Authorities continued to refuse to divulge information regarding numbers or names of persons detained on political or security-related charges, but they did release thousands of death notices of detainees during the year.

According to the *Washington Post*, lawyers familiar with the process said the Defense Ministry sent the names of detainees to civil registry offices across the country throughout the year and instructed that these prisoners be registered as dead. The deaths were registered across the provinces of Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Latakia.

The civil registry offices issued notices that were essentially executive summaries, reportedly listing few details about the deceased. Military hospitals issued other death notices, formal certificates, and medical reports. These routinely listed the cause of death as heart attack or stroke.

In March the SNHR reported that more than 104,000 persons remained in detention for reasons related to the conflict, including women and children, as well as doctors, humanitarian aid providers, human rights defenders, and journalists.

Prison conditions for political or national security prisoners, especially accused opposition members, reportedly continued to be much worse than those for common criminals. According to local NGOs, authorities deliberately placed political prisoners in crowded cells with convicted and alleged felons and subjected them to verbal and physical threats and abuse. Political prisoners also reported they often slept on the ground due to lack of beds and faced frequent searches. According to reports from families, particularly the Families for Freedom collective, authorities refused many political prisoners access to family and counsel. Some former detainees and human rights observers reported the government denied political prisoners access to reading materials, including the Quran, and prohibited them from praying in their cells.

Many prominent civilian activists and journalists detained or forcibly disappeared following the 2011 protests reportedly remained in detention. While the government released thousands of detainee death notices during the year, there were no known developments in the majority of cases of reported disappearances from prior years, including the following persons believed forcibly disappeared by government forces: nonviolent protester Abdel Aziz Kamal al-Rihawi; Alawite opposition figure Abdel Aziz al-Khair; Kurdish activist Berazani Karro; Yassin Ziadeh, brother of dissident Radwan

Ziadeh; human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq and his assistant, Mohamed Zaza; human rights activist Adel Barazi; and peace activist and theater director Zaki Kordillo and his son, Mihyar Kordillo.

HRW reported that courts continued to detain activists under the counterterrorism law, referring detainees arbitrarily to the CTC, courts-martial, or criminal courts, if at all. Authorities continued to re-arrest many of those released under earlier amnesties and those who previously signed settlement agreements with the government.

There were few updates in the kidnappings of many persons believed abducted by ISIS, armed opposition, or unidentified armed groups. As of March 2017, the SNHR attributed several thousand arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances to armed opposition groups (see section 1.g.).

CIVIL JUDICIAL PROCEDURES AND REMEDIES

Government civil remedies for human rights violations were functionally nonexistent. In areas under their control, opposition groups did not organize consistent civil judicial procedures. ISIS and other extremist groups had no known civil judicial mechanisms in the territories they controlled.

In the Kurdish-administered parts of northeastern Syria, civilian peace and reconciliation committees reportedly resolved civil disputes before elevating them to a court.

PROPERTY RESTITUTION

Government security forces routinely seized detainees' property, personal items, and electronics. The law also provides for the confiscation of movable and immovable property of persons convicted of terrorism, a common charge for political opponents and other detainees since 2012. Security forces did not catalog these items in accordance with the law and, although detained individuals had the right to retrieve their confiscated belongings after release, authorities often did not return the property. According to media reports and activists, government forces also seized property left by refugees and IDPs. The CTC can try to convict cases in the absence of the defendant, thus providing legal cover for confiscation of such property left by refugees and IDPs. The situation was further complicated due to the destruction of court records and property registries in opposition-held areas in the years following the 2011 uprising.

Law No. 10, passed on April 2, allows the government to create "redevelopment zones" to be slated for reconstruction. Property owners are notified to provide documentary proof of property ownership or risk losing ownership to the state. If an individual does not claim ownership successfully during the one-year period, as amended by Law No. 42, the property reverts to the local government. An individual can prove ownership in person or through designated proxies.

In May HRW reported that the government's adoption of Law No. 10 will lead to confiscation of property without due process or compensation and will create a major obstacle for refugees and IDPs to return home. HRW said that it will be nearly impossible

for thousands of refugees and IDPs to claim their property and that the procedural requirement of the law, coupled with the political context, created significant potential for abuse and discrimination, particularly toward the Sunni population. Subsequently, in an October report, HRW detailed how the government began preventing displaced residents from former antigovernment-held areas in Darayya and Qaboun from returning to their properties, including by demolishing their properties with no warning and without providing alternative housing or compensation. The government amended the law on November 7 to add an appeals process, but NGOs continued to express serious concern the law would be implemented in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary searches, but the government routinely failed to respect these prohibitions. Police and other security services frequently bypassed search warrant requirements in criminal cases by citing security reasons or emergency grounds for entry into private property. Arbitrary home raids occurred in large cities and towns of most governorates where the government maintained a presence, usually following antigovernment protests, opposition attacks against government targets, or resumption of government control.

The government continued to open mail addressed to both citizens and foreign residents and routinely monitored internet communications, including email (see section 2.a.).

As described in the February and March COI reports and the May Urnammu report, the government employed informer systems against political opponents and perceived national security threats.

The government continued to bar membership in some political organizations, including Islamist parties and often arrested their members (see section 3).

The government reportedly punished large numbers of family members for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives, as indicated in the March COI report. In May a report by Urnammu included the example of a fighter from Idlib; government forces arrested his mother (Bahia) in 2012, as well as his sister (Misa) and 15-year-old nephew (Salim) in 2015, to pressure him to surrender; the three family members remained in detention as of May.

g. Abuses in Internal Conflict

The government, nongovernment militias such as the National Defense Forces, opposition groups, the SDF, and extremist groups such as HTS and ISIS continued to participate in armed combat throughout the year. The government of Turkey participated in armed combat in the northwest of the country. The governments of Russia and Iran, as well as Hizballah, supported government forces across the country. The most egregious human rights violations and abuses stemmed from the government's systemic disregard for the safety and well-being of its people. These abuses manifested themselves in a

complete denial of citizens' ability to choose their government peacefully, a breakdown in the ability of law enforcement authorities to protect the majority of individuals from state and nonstate violence, and the use of violence against civilians and civilian institutions. Numerous reports such as those by the COI in February and March indicated that the government arbitrarily and unlawfully killed, tortured, and detained persons on a large scale. Attacks against schools, hospitals, places of worship, water and electrical stations, bakeries, markets, civil defense force centers, densely populated residential areas, and houses were common throughout the country. In May the COI concluded that the methods employed in Syria to carry out sieges, as documented by the COI since 2012, amounted to egregious violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law and, in some instances, to war crimes.

As of October there were more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in neighboring countries and 5.9 million IDPs. The government frequently blocked access for humanitarian assistance and removed items such as medical supplies from convoys headed to civilian areas, particularly areas held by opposition groups.

Media sources and human rights groups varied in their estimates of how many persons have been killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) documented almost 365,000 conflict-related deaths and estimated 522,000 total conflict-related deaths from 2011 until September, while the SNHR estimated more than 220,000 civilians were killed during the same time. The SNHR attributed 89 percent of civilian deaths to government forces and Iranian militias.

Killings: The government reportedly committed the majority of killings throughout the year (see section 1.a.).

Reports from NGOs, including reports cited by the United Nations, indicated that the government siege and recapture of eastern Ghouta resulted in mass civilian casualties. The SNHR compiled a list of almost 1,500 civilians killed in the offensive. The COI reported in February, May, and August that government and progovernment forces attacked civilian infrastructure, including temporary shelters, and both makeshift and formal hospitals. Media and NGOs widely reported aerial bombardments that they characterized as indiscriminate, including with "barrel bombs."

The COI concluded in an August report that progovernment militias committed war crimes on April 8 and 23 by launching attacks killing six civilians near Makramiyah village and the Dhahabiyah IDP site.

The COI also reported in February and August that armed rebel groups launched counterattacks from eastern Ghouta; these counterattacks, in the view of the COI, were not directed against military objectives. For example, in February the COI concluded that Jaysh al-Islam and Faylaq ar-Rahman committed a war crime by launching what it described as indiscriminate attacks against Damascus city with unguided mortars that killed dozens of civilians. The SNHR attributed 30 civilian deaths to armed opposition groups in the first half of the year.

In August the COI concluded that on January 18, Kurdish forces committed a war crime by launching an attack it characterized as indiscriminate by shelling a psychiatric hospital in Azaz and killing a woman. The SNHR attributed more than 110 civilian deaths to the Kurdish forces (mainly YPG) in the first half of the year.

Lebanese Hezbollah (LHZ) reportedly committed numerous abuses and violations throughout the conflict. For example, according to multiple news outlets, during government-led military operations to capture Daraa, LHZ field officer Major Wassim Hourur executed 23 soldiers from the Ninth Armored Division in the Zanamin area after they refused his order to board vehicles and deploy to Daraa.

Violent extremist and terrorist groups HTS and ISIS reportedly committed abuses and violations.

The SNHR attributed 23 civilian deaths to the HTS in the first half of the year. The COI concluded in August that Faylaq ar-Rahman and/or the HTS and Ahrar al-Sham were responsible for war crimes as well as intending to spread terror among civilians with mortar attacks it characterized as indiscriminate and which killed civilians in Damascus on January 22, February 1, and February 6.

Media outlets reported that ISIS killed more than 250 persons in July in Sweida Province, killing persons in their homes and killing others with two suicide-bombing attacks in the Druze-majority Sweida city. Media and HRW reported ISIS kidnapped at least 27 persons during these attacks and cited reports from local media that two of those kidnapped died, including one by beheading. In November government forces negotiated the release of the remaining 19 hostages in Palmyra.

Foreign powers also were implicated in deaths reportedly resulting from indiscriminate use of force.

The SNHR attributed almost 400 civilian deaths to Russia in the first half of the year and more than 6,200 since entry into the conflict. In its February report, the COI implicated Russian forces in a continued pattern of attacks affecting crowded marketplaces. For example, the February COI report detailed how in November 2017, minutes after 2 p.m., a series of airstrikes hit the main market, surrounding houses, and the Free Syrian police station in a densely civilian-populated area of Atarib, Aleppo, killing at least 84 persons, including six women and five children. The COI reported that all information available indicated that a Russian fixed-wing aircraft conducted the strikes and concluded that the attack may amount to a war crime.

There were reports Turkish armed forces killed civilians during the capture of Afrin. For example, in August the COI reported that on March 16, the Turkish air force and affiliated Free Syrian Army (FSA) units continued to escalate bombardments over Afrin city. Witnesses observed fighter jets circling above the Al-Mahmoudiyah neighborhood and described an attack launched opposite a cattle market, where dozens of civilians reportedly had queued in vehicles, waiting to leave the city. The strike reportedly killed at least 20 civilians, including women, children, and elderly persons. The COI assessed that,

in conducting airstrikes beginning on January 20, the Turkish air force may have failed to take all feasible precautions prior to launching certain attacks, which it asserted was a violation of international humanitarian law.

Abductions: Government and progovernment forces reportedly were responsible for the vast majority of disappearances during the year (see section 1.b.). In August the SNHR reported approximately 95,000 forcibly disappeared since 2011, asserting that the government disappeared 86 percent of them.

Armed groups not affiliated with the government also reportedly abducted individuals, targeting religious leaders, aid workers, suspected government affiliates, journalists, and activists. As of March the SNHR attributed more than 2,400 ongoing arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances to Kurdish forces (mainly YPG), more than 2,500 to other armed opposition groups, almost 1,700 to HTS, and more than 8,100 to ISIS.

In March the COI reported that members of armed groups detained women and girls belonging to minority religious groups to use them as bargaining chips for initiating prisoner swaps with commanders detained by government forces. The March COI report described a 2013 raid in which Jaysh al-Islam, Ainad al-Sham, and other armed groups took hostage numerous Alawite families and some Ismaili, Shia, Druze, and Christian families from Adra al-Omalayah, Damascus, and moved them to Douma.

The *Atlantic* reported that government forces secured the release of 200 Alawite hostages from Jaysh al-Islam during the recapture of Douma in April. The COI relayed in August that residents in Afrin reported patterns of arbitrary arrests and detention, beatings, and kidnappings by armed groups affiliated with the FSA beginning with their takeover of certain areas. For example, the COI reported the arrest and disappearance of 29 young men in the villages of Maidanu and Sotio by armed groups. According to the COI, hundreds of members of religious minority groups, primarily women and girls, remained in the captivity of armed groups as of March, waiting to be exchanged for government prisoners.

Local media sources and human rights groups such as Syrians for Truth and Justice reported isolated instances of fighters associated with the YPG detaining some journalists, human rights activists, opposition party members, and persons who refused to cooperate with Kurdish armed groups. In some instances the location of the detainees remained unknown. In February the COI reported that elements associated with the SDF detained several relatives of wanted activists in territories under its control for periods of up to six weeks to obtain information about their whereabouts and pressure the activists to surrender. The SDF also arrested relatives of members of the FSA and ISIS for interrogation and alleged links to terrorist activity. According to the COI, several of those detained were women and children, including a 16-year-old girl and a 10-year-old boy. In March the COI reported that elements associated with the SDF and Asayish (Kurdish internal security forces) increased detentions of men for attempting to evade conscription. The COI also reported that some Kurdish forces continued to detain civilians supporting competing political parties or individuals perceived to be insufficiently loyal. The COI reported instances of torture of political opponents by elements associated with the SDF

and YPG. In May Urnammu reported detentions in Kurdish-controlled territories increased and that at least two opponents of the PYD and their families had been abducted—a trend also noted by a September HRW report.

The location and status of Khalil Arfu and Sukfan Amin Hamza from Derek, al-Hasakah Governorate, and members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party reportedly abducted by Asayish associated with the rival PYD party in 2014, remained unknown.

According to the COI and NGOs, the HTS detained political opponents, perceived government supporters and their families, journalists, activists, and humanitarian workers critical of HTS or perceived as affiliated with other rebel groups at odds with the HTS in Idlib. For example, the March COI report described how in July 2017 HTS forces dragged two women from their apartment and down the stairs of their building in Atareb, Aleppo, because they were the mother and wife of a man wanted by the HTS for stealing one of their vehicles; the women remained in an HTS prison as of March.

Terrorist groups conducted kidnappings, particularly in the southwest where ISIS continued to target members of the Druze community and other religious minority groups. According to multiple media reports, in July ISIS kidnapped at least 20 women and 16 children, mostly belonging to the Druze community, one of whom ISIS later executed. The abductions came after a series of suicide bombings that reportedly killed nearly 200 Druze.

In 2014 ISIS abducted an estimated 6,000 women and children, mainly Yezidis, during attacks against northern Iraq and reportedly brought thousands of them to Syria, where they were sold as sex slaves, forced into nominal marriage to ISIS fighters, or given as “gifts” to ISIS commanders. NGOs and activists, such as Yazda and the Free Yezidi Foundation, reported that while more than 2,000 Yezidi women and children have since escaped, been liberated in SDF military operations, or been released from captivity, such returns dwindled during the year, and an estimated 3,000 remained missing. In March the COI reported that in 2016 ISIS began to allow its members who “owned” Yezidis to sell the Yezidi children separately, resulting in the separation of children from their mothers and subsequent sale of young boys as house servants and girls, as young as nine years old, as sex slaves. ISIS reportedly then gave such children Muslim names; consequently, identifying their ancestry remains difficult. Thousands of abducted girls and women, however, remained missing.

There were no updates in the kidnappings of the following persons believed to have been abducted by ISIS, armed opposition, or unidentified armed groups: activists Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil, and Nazim Hamadi; religious leaders Bolous Yazigi and Yohanna Ibrahim; and peace activist Paulo Dall’Oglio. Terrorist group HTS released Japanese journalist Jumpei Yasuda in October after three years’ captivity. These individuals were among the estimated thousands of disappearances reported by activists and media.

Physical Abuse, Punishment, and Torture: According to the United Nations and reliable NGO reports, the government and its affiliated militias consistently engaged in physical abuse, punishment, and torture of opposition fighters and civilians (see sections 1.c. and 1.d.). The SNHR reported more than 14,000 individuals died due to torture between 2011 and September and that approximately 99 percent of these deaths were attributable to government forces. The SNHR attributed to the government more than 930 deaths due to torture in the first nine months of the year.

With regard to sexual and gender-based violence, such as rape or assault, as a tactic of war, the COI explained in its March report that during the earlier stages of the conflict, ground operations and house raids gave a greater range of scenarios for government forces to commit sexual and gender-based abuses. As armed groups proliferated and acquired heavy weaponry, government forces began to prioritize airstrikes, thus decreasing interaction between government forces and the wider population. As the conflict progressed, most sexual and gender-based abuses by government forces, therefore, occurred at checkpoints or in detention. When the number of former detainees crossing into neighboring countries decreased, so did the opportunity to establish a comprehensive picture of sexual and gender-based abuses occurring in government detention in 2016 and 2017. The COI added that persons in areas retaken by government forces, often using Shia militias, remained reluctant to discuss events occurring in these areas due to fear of reprisals.

Government forces reportedly continued to use prohibited chemical weapons and cluster munitions in densely populated areas and attacks against civilian and protected objects, including schools and hospitals. In its February and August reports, the COI included evidence that it determined indicated use of weaponized chlorine gas and organophosphorous pesticides. For example, the August COI report and a May report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) described an alleged chemical weapons attack on Saraqeb. On February 4, at approximately 9 p.m., government helicopters reportedly dropped at least two barrels carrying chlorine in the Taleel area of Saraqeb. Victims reportedly described symptoms consistent with the use of chlorine, including shortness of breath, a burning throat, coughing, dilated pupils, and chest pain, and recalled a smell similar to household detergents. The attack reportedly injured at least 11 men, including three first responders. In its August report, the COI stated that documentary and material evidence confirmed the presence of helicopters in the area and the use of two yellow gas cylinders. Examining similar attacks in Douma, eastern Ghouta, on January 22 and February 1, the COI concluded that government forces, affiliated militias, or both committed war crimes by using prohibited weapons and launching attacks, which it characterized as indiscriminate, in civilian populated areas.

Numerous sources, including first responders from the Syria Civil Defense, reported signs of chemical weapons use in Douma on April 7. The COI reported that a gas cylinder containing a chlorine payload delivered by a government helicopter struck a multistory residential apartment building located near the southwest of Shohada Square. The COI, along with various human rights organizations, reported at least 49 confirmed deaths.

In a September report, the BBC determined there was enough evidence to be confident that at least eight chemical attacks occurred in the country during the year (seven in eastern Ghouta) and 106 since September 2013, when the Syrian president signed the international Chemical Weapons Convention and agreed to destroy the country's chemical weapons stockpile. The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria and the now-disbanded OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) concluded that 37 incidents between September 2013 and April have involved or were likely to have involved the use of chemical weapons. The COI and other UN-affiliated bodies concluded there were reasonable grounds to believe that chemical weapons were used in 18 other cases. The JIM concluded that ISIS carried out two attacks involving sulphur mustard, and the BBC reported that evidence suggested ISIS carried out three other reported attacks. The JIM and OPCW have so far not concluded that any armed opposition groups other than ISIS have carried out a chemical attack, and the BBC's investigation found no credible evidence to suggest otherwise. Rather, the BBC accused the government of routinely employing chemical weapons as a tactic of war, including in at least 51 air-launched chemical weapon attacks, and likely responsible in the vast majority of the 106 cases since 2013.

In addition to chemical weapons, the government also reportedly employed prohibited cluster munitions. In its February report, the COI stated that progovernment forces continued to use cluster munitions, including in densely populated civilian areas on at least three occasions in November 2017 in eastern Ghouta. For example, in one incident three weapons struck a residential area in Hammourieh, eastern Ghouta. When rescuers were arriving at the hospital with those injured by the first weapon, a second weapon reportedly released numerous bomblets hitting the vicinity of the hospital, which was located in a residential area. The second incident killed one man and injured at least 25 persons, including three children. Images of weapons remnants taken at the scene reportedly show components of cluster bombs that Syrian and Russian forces possess. The COI concluded that, in such cases, the progovernment forces committed a war crime by launching attacks in a civilian populated area that it characterized as indiscriminate.

There were also instances of armed opposition groups reportedly engaging in unlawful detention, physical abuse, punishment, and treatment equivalent to torture, primarily targeting suspected government agents and collaborators, progovernment militias, and rival armed groups. Between 2011 and September, the SNHR attributed more than 40 deaths due to torture to armed opposition groups, more than 20 to HTS, and more than 30 to ISIS, including a child and 13 women. The SNHR attributed 35 deaths from torture to Kurdish forces. The COI, SNHR, and other NGOs acknowledged difficulties in obtaining accurate reporting on abuses committed by ISIS, creating an artificial reduction in ISIS abuses. In an August report, the COI stated that significant challenges continued to arise, including: how ISIS prevented civilians from documenting attacks as a matter of policy; how chaos often left victims and witnesses unable to identify whether a given attack was carried out by aerial or ground operations; and how ISIS terrorists embedded themselves and their military installations in numerous civilian infrastructures, including hospitals, thus significantly complicating investigations. In a May report, Urnammu stated that due to the severe restrictions imposed by ISIS on the use of the internet and telephones and the killing of anyone suspected of opposing the organization, it was very

difficult to document the number of children kidnapped. Urnammu ceased communicating with activists in their areas after ISIS killed Samer (Abu Jaafar al-Diri), reportedly one of the most important activists interested in documenting detainees and exposing violations.

The COI reported in February that in November 2017 the Nour al-Din al-Zenki armed group detained three civilians, including a member of the Free Education Directorate, in Darat Izza. The detentions took place during clashes with HTS in Aleppo Governorate. During a month of detention, at least two of the detainees reportedly were beaten, kept in solitary confinement, and forced to fingerprint a false confession. Two of the detainees were released in December 2017 after being brought before a “military” judge of the armed group, but the fate of the third detainee was unclear.

Unspecified elements of Kurdish forces also were implicated in at least one instance of abuse. For example, the SNHR reported that Kurdish forces arrested Saleh Ahmad al Yasin from the pharmacy where he worked in Jazrat al Bo Hamid, Deir al-Zour, in April, and that on June 7, his family received his body after he reportedly died of torture and negligent health care inside a detention center.

In March the COI reported deaths in detention centers run by terrorist groups such as HTS and ISIS. There were numerous reports of torture as well as reports the detainees received inadequate food and, in cases of religious minorities, were forced to pray or convert to Islam or both. The COI also noted instances in which the HTS and ISIS detained and tortured individuals passing through checkpoints.

In the territory it controlled, HTS imposed its interpretation of sharia, which the COI reported in March had negatively affected women and religious minorities. Employing sharia courts, the HTS reportedly denied those arrested the opportunity to challenge in court the legal basis or arbitrary nature of their detention, permitted confessions obtained through torture, and executed or forcibly disappeared perceived opponents and their families. For example, in March the COI reported that in 2016 Jabhat Fatah al-Sham stoned to death a woman from Heish village in Idlib after members of the terrorist group accused her of having engaged in extramarital relations. Authorities reportedly apprehended the woman in the home of the unmarried man with whom she was involved and immediately executed her as an honor killing. The unmarried male reportedly was summarily shot and killed immediately upon being detained.

The March COI report also detailed instances of what it described as torture by the HTS and its constituent armed groups. For example, in 2013 in Zabdean Deir al-Asafir, south of Damascus, a male detainee reportedly was tortured and interrogated for more than 10 days, after which he was stripped naked and a man with a Libyan accent made the detainee kneel on all fours and sodomized him with a stick.

In May a Urnammu report detailed the experiences of Shadi, who reportedly was 15 years old when he was accused by the HTS of working for the Coalition. Shadi was arrested, held incommunicado, and transferred to three different prisons, including Al-Aqab prison, during four months’ detention. The Urnammu report described Al-Aqab as small

caves at a depth of approximately six feet and height of four and a half feet, from which detainees only emerged for interrogation and torture. Shadi reported being tortured and interrogated for several days at Al-Aqab, including by a method reportedly unique to Jabhat al-Nusra called “the coffin.”

There were numerous reports that the HTS and its constituent armed groups forced members of religious minorities to convert to Islam and adopt Sunni customs, contributing to minority flight from HTS territories. The March COI report described how in 2015 HTS predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra: stormed Druze villages in Idlib; forced community members to convert to Islam; forced all men to shave their mustaches and abandon their religious dress code; forced the women to wear the niqab; urged Druze women to marry the groups’ fighters; and urged Druze men to marry non-Druze women; all of which were forbidden under the Druze religion and customs.

There were widespread reports that ISIS also engaged in abuses and brutality against those it captured in or near the shrinking territories it controlled. ISIS frequently punished victims publicly and forced residents, including children, to watch unlawful killings and amputations, as detailed by the *New York Times*, a March report by the COI, and a May report by Urnammu. The March COI report described how males, including boys raped by older men, were killed for allegedly engaging in sodomy, and videos of the killings were widely circulated to terrorize populations under ISIS control.

Activists, NGOs, and media reported numerous accounts of women in ISIS-held territory facing severe punishments, including killing by stoning. For example, the March COI report includes an eyewitness account of a 2013 stoning in Deir al-Zour in which Hisbah police made a woman kneel on the ground, threw a cement block at the woman’s head, then threw a succession of smaller stones until she collapsed and her brain matter was visible on the floor.

ISIS also regularly committed abuses against captured FSA and YPG fighters. ISIS fighters reportedly beat captives (including with cables) during interrogations and tortured and killed those held in its detention centers.

ISIS also beat persons because of their dress; several sources reported ISIS members beat women for not covering their faces. One example in the March COI report was that of a woman seven months’ pregnant who, in 2015, Hisbah arrested in Raqqa for talking to a seller while buying gloves. She was interrogated and beaten with a wooden stick while in detention. ISIS justified its use of corporal punishment, including amputations and lashings, under its interpretation of sharia. Because ISIS perceived unmarried women and girls older than the age of puberty as a threat to its ideology and enforced social order, the March COI report detailed a trend beginning in 2014 to marry forcibly Sunni girls and women living in areas under its control. Many Sunni women reportedly were passed among multiple ISIS fighters, some as many as six or seven times within two years.

The May Urnammu report detailed the experiences of Akram, a 16-year-old who, according to his mother, ISIS detained three times on charges such as smoking or not being in the mosque at the time of prayer. Akram reportedly was detained for four months

at Jarablis Prison and subsequently at al-Bab Prison outside Aleppo, where he was tortured, indoctrinated in a sharia course, and was not heard from again.

Child Soldiers: Several sources documented the continued unlawful recruitment and use of children in combat. The UN General Assembly's annual *Children and Armed Conflict* report to the secretary-general reported a 13 percent increase in the recruitment of child soldiers in Syria in 2017 compared with 2016, with almost 1,000 cases verified. According to the report, 90 percent of the children served in combat roles and 26 percent were below the age of 15. The report attributed almost 300 verified cases to ISIS; almost 250 to FSA-affiliated groups; almost 225 to SDF-affiliated groups; almost 75 to government forces and progovernment militias; more than 50 to Ahrar al-Sham; more than 40 to HTS; and almost 40 to Jaysh al-Islam.

The COI reported that progovernment militias enlisted children as young as age 13. The COI reported the government sometimes paid children between the ages of six and 13 to be informants, exposing them to danger. In the earlier years of the conflict, most of the children recruited by armed forces and groups were boys ages 15 to 17 and served primarily in support roles away from the front lines.

HRW reported armed opposition forces used children younger than age 18 as fighters. According to HRW and the COI, numerous groups and factions failed to prevent the enlistment of minors, while elements affiliated with the SDF, as well as ISIS and HTS actively recruited children as fighters. The COI reported that armed groups, "recruited, trained, and used children in active combat roles."

In February the COI reported that elements of the SDF continued to conscript and train children as young as age 13 for military service. The COI report referenced reporting that elements of the SDF forcibly conscripted men in IDP camps and arrested some men for refusing to join the SDF. For example, the February COI report detailed that in July 2017 two boys, 15 and 16 years old, enlisted with the SDF in Tabqa, Raqqah, with the younger subsequently sustaining an arm injury in combat. Although a less frequent occurrence, girls reportedly were also recruited; the February COI report included a teenage girl who was recruited by elements of the SDF in Raqqah in October 2017. In May Urnammu similarly reported the SDF detained and recruited 200 children younger than age 15 since the beginning of 2017. In August HRW reported that elements of the YPG have been recruiting children and using some in hostilities despite pledging to stop the practice.

In September the SDF issued an order banning the recruitment and use in combat of anyone younger than age 18, ordering the military records office to verify the ages of those currently enlisted, requiring the release of any conscripted children to their families or to educational authorities in northeast Syria, and ending salary payments. The SDF order also prohibits using children for spying, to act as guards, or to deliver supplies to combatants. The order makes military commanders responsible for appointing ombudsmen to receive complaints of child recruitment, and ordered punitive measures against commanders who failed to comply with the ban on child recruitment. This action followed a June report by the NGO Geneva Call that the Kurdish YPG/YPJ took measures to address infringements of the Deed of Commitment they signed in 2014 protecting

children in armed conflict. The Kurdish forces reportedly admitted their conduct, reiterated their full commitment to the Deed of Commitment, and announced implementation of new measures to their internal code of conduct. These included a new internal investigations mechanism and opening a special office to receive complaints about child recruitment or use in combat. In October Geneva Call trained more than 200 SDF officers in their military academy on the prohibition to recruit children and on the law of armed conflict, and agreed to extend the training to all new groups of officers coming to the academy. In early December the SDF and Geneva Call reported the SDF had released 56 boys younger than age 18 to their families.

According to the COI and Urnammu, ISIS recruited and enlisted children as young as age 10. ISIS propaganda videos depict juvenile executioners from its “Cubs of the Caliphate” unit shooting prisoners at close range. A May Urnammu report describes how ISIS: abducted 153 Kurdish children in 2014; detained the children at a school in Manbai, Aleppo; showed them videos of beheadings and attacks; subjected them to five months of training on ISIS combat ideology; and informed them they would be released if they completed religious training and spread the ISIS vision among their Kurdish communities.

Also see the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Other Conflict-related Abuse: The COI stated in February that siege warfare affected civilians more than any other tactic employed by the warring parties. In a May report, the COI stated that Syrian civilians in besieged areas countrywide were encircled, trapped, and prevented from leaving; indiscriminately bombed and killed; starved, and routinely denied medical evacuations, the delivery of vital foodstuffs, health items, and other essential supplies—in an effort to compel the surrender of those in control of the areas in which they lived. Acute restrictions on food and medicine reportedly caused malnutrition-related deaths, increased maternal-fetal complications, as well as outbreaks of hepatitis, cutaneous leishmaniasis, typhoid, and dysentery. According to reports by the COI, AI, and other NGOs such as PAX, government and progovernment forces were responsible for most siege activity.

All remaining sieges ended during the year, including the government and progovernment sieges in eastern Ghouta (under siege from 2013 until April) and Yarmouk Camp, Damascus (under siege from 2013 until May), as well as the much smaller HTS sieges of Foua and Kefraya villages in Idlib (under siege from 2015 until July). According to PAX the devastation of eastern Ghouta played a decisive role in the surrender of the remaining besieged enclaves in northern Homs and southern Damascus to government and progovernment forces. As with many other government sieges, the COI reported in August that the aerial and ground operations against Yarmouk Camp were carried out by the Syrian army, affiliated militias, including Palestinian militias and the National Defense Forces, and the Russian Air Force.

De-escalation zone agreements reached under the auspices of Iran, Russia, and Turkey called for improved humanitarian access, but as of September government and progovernment forces had retaken all but one de-escalation zone (Idlib). Government and progovernment forces remained prepared for an assault on Idlib, occupied by three million civilians and the last armed opposition forces and HTS, should a Russian and Turkish-monitored demilitarization agreement fail.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, half of all health facilities were closed or partially functioning and the conflict has killed hundreds of health-care workers. NGO observers and international aid organizations reported that government and progovernment forces specifically targeted health-care workers, medical facilities, ambulances, and patients, and restricted access to medical facilities and services to civilians and prisoners, particularly in Russian-backed government assaults on eastern Ghouta, Daraa, and Idlib. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) reported that, from 2011 to September, combatants attacked almost 500 medical facilities, killing almost 850 medical personnel throughout the country. For example, in September PHR reported that government forces attacked three hospitals, two civil defense centers, and an ambulance system in Idlib as government and progovernment forces increased shelling of the last opposition-controlled governorate. The COI reported in August that on April 29, at approximately 10:25 a.m. and again at 10:30 a.m., progovernment forces launched airstrikes against the surgical hospital in Zafarana, Homs. The COI concluded the attacks by progovernment forces constituted a war crime.

February, May, and August reports by the COI, as well as a July report by AI, reported the government deliberately obstructed the efforts of sick and injured persons to obtain help, and many such individuals elected not to seek medical assistance in hospitals due to fear of arrest, detention, torture, or death. The COI found that the government detained many Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) volunteers and medical staff on the pretext of “having supported terrorists.” According to the COI, the law effectively criminalized medical aid to the opposition, and the COI reported in May that government intelligence and law enforcement agencies forcibly disappeared medical personnel providing treatment to perceived opposition supporters.

In May the COI reported that in some instances between 2013 and this year, besieged armed groups allegedly prevented civilians from leaving besieged areas and used them as human shields against assault by government forces, the Russian Air Force, and other progovernment forces.

In its February report, the COI assessed that ISIS used civilians as human shields in 2017 in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour. The COI reported that in Raqqa ISIS ordered the civilians to move to areas it controlled and actively prevented them from leaving by sniping those who fled and by laying landmines. The COI determined that ISIS deliberately placed civilians in areas where they were exposed to combat operations to render those areas immune from SDF and Coalition attack. Similarly, the COI described how ISIS employed Hisbah street patrols, checkpoints, fines, and corporal punishment to prevent civilians from leaving Deir al-Zour. ISIS reportedly took these actions to render the areas immune

to attack from government forces, the Russian Air Force, and other progovernment forces. The COI concluded that ISIS thereby committed a war crime by what it characterized as the use of human shields.

The government and its allies continued forcibly displacing civilians for reasons other than military necessity (see section 2.d.). As detailed by the COI in its May and August reports, government and progovernment forces reportedly offered to evacuate suffering civilian residents from besieged areas only after armed groups surrendered. For example, after reaching local truces in eastern Ghouta in April, evacuations were carried out from the largest remaining opposition-held pocket of Douma. The COI reported that more than 40,000 of those displaced were relocated to overcrowded IDP sites in the Damascus suburbs, while up to 50,000 others were evacuated to Idlib and Aleppo Governorates, where humanitarian response remained critically insufficient. Similarly, a majority of the 10,000 civilians who remained trapped inside Yarmouk Camp until its recapture in May reportedly were forcibly displaced pursuant to an “evacuation agreement.” The August COI report detailed how Russian military police supervised the transportation of approximately 35,000 men, women, and children, on government buses and vehicles from villages in northern Homs primarily to Idlib and Jarablus, Aleppo, in May.

The May COI report further detailed a practice in which, after hostilities ceased and local truces were implemented, government and progovernment forces required certain individuals from the previously besieged areas to undergo a reconciliation process as a condition to remain in their homes. The option to reconcile reportedly often was not offered to health-care personnel, local council members, relief workers, activists, dissidents, and family members of fighters. In effect, the COI assessed that the “reconciliation process” induced displacement in the form of organized evacuations of those deemed insufficiently loyal to the government and served as a government strategy for punishing those individuals. Additionally, various sources reported cases in which the government targeted Syrians who agreed to reconciliation agreements. For example, upon returning to Da’el, Daraa, pursuant to a reconciliation agreement, a former opposition police commander was reportedly arrested by air force security and later found dead with multiple gunshot wounds.

The COI and NGOs such as the Arab Center for Human Rights indicated that—taken together with steps such as the enactment of Presidential Decree No. 10 on the confiscation of unregistered properties—the forcible displacements may fit into a wider plan to strip the displaced of their property rights, transfer populations, and enrich the government and its closest allies (see section 1.e.).

Turkish-backed opposition armed groups reportedly engaged in forcible displacement of civilians and related abuses in Afrin. According to the August COI report, a June HRW report, and NGOs such as the Free Yezidi Foundation and Yazda, numerous residents of Afrin reported widespread looting and appropriation of civilian homes, hospitals, churches, and a Yezidi shrine by members of armed opposition groups and citizens when the armed opposition groups entered Afrin city in March. Witnesses stated that Turkish troops were on occasion present in the vicinity where lootings took place but had not

acted to prevent them. Residents reported having to purchase back cars stolen by the armed groups for between one million and 2.5 million Syrian pounds (\$2,000 and \$5,000).

The COI noted the destruction of Yazidi religious sites appeared to have sectarian undertones, while house appropriations targeted mainly Kurdish owners who had fled clashes. Victims reported cases of looting to a newly established “military police,” which mainly consisted of former FSA fighters, or to committees established by armed groups, both of which reportedly failed to offer any tangible restitution. Turkish-backed armed opposition groups reportedly barred returnees from their properties and informed them that their real or presumed support for the YPG precluded them from living in the area; confiscated homes were marked with graffiti and then used by armed groups for military purposes or as housing for fighters and their families, who arrived from eastern Ghouta via Idlib after its evacuation. If any armed group members were shown to be acting under the effective command and control of Turkish forces, the COI assessed that violations committed may be attributable to Turkish military commanders who knew or should have known about the violations (see section 2.d.).

International media reported widely on government and nongovernment forces attacking and destroying religious as well as UNESCO-listed world heritage sites. The American Academy for the Advancement of Science noted many instances of visible damage to cultural heritage sites. Government and nongovernment forces also pillaged and destroyed property, including homes, farms, and businesses of their perceived opponents.

According to AI and other human rights NGOs, there were instances of property confiscation by the YPG in Kurdish-controlled territories.

According to humanitarian aid workers, ISIS seized property from international and local aid workers at checkpoints that ISIS controlled throughout the country. An ISIS fatwa functioning as law in ISIS-held territories validated expropriation of agricultural businesses from persons ISIS deemed as apostates and laid out rules for distributing the confiscated property to recruits. ISIS and HTS were widely reported to have interfered with the enjoyment of privacy, family, home, and correspondence.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

While the constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, the government severely restricted this right, often terrorizing, abusing, or killing those who attempted to exercise this right.

Freedom of Expression: The law contains a number of speech offenses limiting the freedom of expression, including provisions criminalizing expression that, for example, “weakens the national sentiment” in times of war or defames the president, courts, military, or public authorities. The government routinely characterized expression as illegal, and individuals could not criticize the government publicly or privately without

fear of reprisal. The government also stifled criticism by invoking provisions of law prohibiting acts or speech inciting sectarianism. It monitored political meetings and relied on informer networks.

Press and Media Freedom: Although the law provides for the “right to access information about public affairs,” and bans “the arrest, questioning, or searching of journalists,” press and media restrictions outweigh freedoms. The law contains many restrictions on freedom of expression for the press, including provisions criminalizing, for example, the dissemination of false or exaggerated news that “weakens the spirit of the Nation,” or the broadcasting abroad of false or exaggerated news that “tarnishes” the country’s reputation. The law bars publication of content that affects “national unity and national security,” harms state symbols, defames religions, or incites sectarian strife or “hate crimes.” The law further forbids publication of any information about the armed forces.

The government continued to exercise extensive control over local print and broadcast media, and the law imposes strict punishment for reporters who do not reveal their government sources in response to government requests. Freedom House reported that only a few dozen print publications remained in circulation, reduced from several hundred prior to the conflict. A number of quasi-independent periodicals, usually owned and produced by individuals with government connections, published during the year. Books critical of the government were illegal.

The government owned some radio stations and most local television companies, and the Ministry of Information closely monitored all radio and television news broadcasts and entertainment programs for adherence to government policies. Despite restrictions on ownership and use, citizens widely used satellite dishes, although the government jammed some Arab networks.

Violence and Harassment: Government forces reportedly detained, arrested, and harassed journalists and other writers for works deemed critical of the state. Harassment included intimidation, banning individuals from the country, dismissing journalists from their positions, and ignoring requests for continued accreditation. According to reliable NGO reports, the government routinely arrested journalists who were either associated with or writing in favor of the opposition and instigated attacks against foreign press outlets throughout the country. For example, in September the Committee to Project Journalists (CPJ) reported that on August 25, Syrian military intelligence forces stopped and arrested Kurdish broadcast journalist Omar Kalo at a checkpoint while he was traveling to renew his passport. The government reportedly interrogated Kalo and subsequently transferred him to the military intelligence prison in Aleppo. He was released in early October.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reported that 26 journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants remained imprisoned by the government, and CPJ reported that at least five journalists remained missing or held hostage as of November. The reason for arrests was often unclear. RSF reported that at least 25 journalists, citizen journalists, and media

assistants died in government detention between 2011 and October. For example, in July RSF and the CPJ reported that photojournalist Niraz Saeed was executed or died due to torture while in government custody at Sednaya Prison in 2016.

The government and ISIS routinely targeted and killed both local and foreign journalists, according to the COI, CPJ, and RSF. The CPJ estimated more than 120 journalists were killed between 2011 and October, while RSF estimated more than 240 journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants were killed during the same period. The CPJ attributed more than half of journalist deaths since 2011 to government and progovernment forces.

During the year the CPJ and RSF documented the deaths of 14 journalists, citizen journalists, and media assistants: Abdul Rahman Ismael Yassin was killed by a government barrel bomb; Ahmed Azize and Bashar al-Attar were killed while aiding wounded civilians in separate Russian “double-tap” air strikes; Kamel abu al-Walid was killed by a landmine; Mustafa Salamah was killed by artillery fire; Obeida abu Omar was killed when a Russian air strike hit his home; Ibrahim al-Munjar was shot and killed by a motorcycle gunman after receiving death threats from ISIS; Ahmed Hamdan, Khaled Hamo, Moammar Bakkor, and Sohaib Aion were killed by government and Russian air strikes and bombings; and Raed Faris and Hamud Junaid were killed by unidentified gunmen (see section 1.a.).

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The government continued to control the dissemination of information strictly, including developments regarding fighting between the government and armed opposition, and prohibited most criticism of the government and discussion of sectarian problems, including religious and ethnic minority rights. The Ministries of Information and Culture censored domestic and foreign publications prior to circulation or importation, including through the General Corporation for the Distribution of Publications, and prevented circulation of content determined critical or sensitive. According to Freedom House, the National Media Council lacked independence, regularly criticized media coverage that was displeasing to the regime, and intimidated media outlets into taking a progovernment editorial line. The government prohibited publication or distribution of any material security officials deemed threatening or embarrassing to the government. Censorship was usually greater for materials in Arabic.

Local journalists reported they engaged in extensive self-censorship on subjects such as criticism of the president and his family, the security services, or Alawite religious groups.

In July 11 letters, RSF asked UN secretary-general Gutierrez, UN special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Jordanian prime minister Omar Razzaz to take all necessary measures to evacuate and provide for the safety and protection of 69 journalists who reportedly self-identified as being exposed to extremely grave danger by the advance of government forces on Daraa and the demilitarized Quneitra region on the Syria-Israel border. The International Press Institute sent a similar letter to Prime Minister Razzaz the same day, and the CPJ sent a similar letter to High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Frederica Mogherini on July 25. Some journalists reportedly told RSF they feared being executed or imprisoned as soon as the government controlled the entire province.

RSF assessed that the regime's persecution of journalists for more than seven years justified their fears, especially as many of them covered the uprising since the outset, helped to document the government's human rights violations, and risked severe reprisals if identified with the opposition.

Libel/Slander Laws: The law criminalizes libel, slander, insult, defamation, and blasphemy, and the government continued to use such provisions to restrict public discussion and detain, arrest, and imprison journalists perceived to have opposed the government.

National Security: The government regularly cited laws protecting national security to restrict media criticism of government policies or public officials.

Nongovernmental Impact: The CPJ and RSF reported that armed opposition groups, HTS, and ISIS targeted journalists. Extremist organizations such as the HTS and ISIS posed a serious threat to press and media freedoms. International NGOs reported the SDF also periodically detained journalists.

For example, the CPJ reported that, on June 22, the FSA detained three cameramen—Kaniwar Khalef, Essam al-Abbas, and Hassan Khalef—near the village of Chath in northeastern Syria after the journalists stopped to ask directions. The FSA reportedly shot at the group's reporter, Heybar Othman, as he ran and, subsequently, transferred the three cameramen to a prison in Azaz. Their fate was unknown as of October.

According to Freedom House, the PYD appeared to exercise partisan influence over media regulation in Kurdish-held territories. In February the COI reported that SDF members intimidated and arrested journalists and activists for reporting on alleged violations by the SDF in Raqqa and elsewhere in the country. The CPJ reported that on September 30, the Sutoro police, an ethnically Assyrian force affiliated with the PYD in the northeast, arrested Souleman Yousph, who is ethnically Assyrian, seized his electronics, and held him for five days. Yousph had published pieces criticizing the PYD and its ally, the Syriac Union Party, for allegedly closing private Assyrian schools and trying to impose a Kurdish nationalist curriculum in public schools.

HTS reportedly detained and tortured journalists. RSF reported that HTS freed journalist Hossam Mahmoud on June 6 after holding him for six months but continued to hold Amjad al Maleh, whom HTS captured with Mahmoud in December 2017. RSF further reported that HTS detained two other journalists earlier in the year, and captors commonly attempted to coerce detainees to give up journalism. RSF assessed that HTS wanted to control media reporting.

The severe restrictions imposed by ISIS on fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of expression, including for the press, were well documented. The CPJ reported that a motorcycle gunman shot and killed journalist Ibrahim al Munjar in Saida, Daraa on the morning of May 17. Al Munjar reportedly had received death threats from ISIS following his reporting on clashes between the FSA and ISIS in Daraa.

INTERNET FREEDOM

The government controlled and restricted access to the internet and monitored email and social media accounts. This year's *Freedom on the Net Report*, the country remained a dangerous and repressive environment for internet users. The report noted a slight improvement in internet access in areas liberated from ISIS. Individuals and groups could not express views via the internet, including by email, without prospect of reprisal. The government applied the law to regulate internet use and prosecute users. On 25 March, the government approved by presidential decree the anticybercrime law (also referred to Law No. 9), which increases penalties for cybercrimes, including those affecting the freedom of expression. It also mandates the creation of specialized courts and delegates specialized jurists for the prosecution of cybercrimes in every governorate. NGOs such as the Gulf Center for Human Rights asserted the new law threatens online freedom. As of late 2017, at least 15 citizen journalists remained imprisoned by the government on charges related to digital activism. Hackers linked to Iran continued cyberattacks against Syrian opposition groups in an effort to disrupt reporting on human rights violations.

In a positive, but limited development, authorities unblocked a number of media websites by the end of 2017, including *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya*, *Asharq al-Awsat*, the Qatari *Al-Arab* newspaper, and *Al-Hayat*, in addition to the Syrian websites *The New Syrian*, *Enab Baladi*, and *Souriali Radio*, according to this year's *Freedom on the Net* report. The report also noted that many nonpolitical websites were also unblocked, such as Wikipedia and the WordPress blogosphere. The block on the Israeli domain (.il) was also lifted.

The government often monitored internet communications, including email; it interfered with and blocked internet service, SMS messages, and two-step verification messages for password recovery or account activation. The government employed sophisticated technologies and hundreds of computer specialists for filtering and surveillance purposes such as monitoring email and social media accounts of detainees, activists, and others. The government did not attempt to restrict the security branches' monitoring and censoring of the internet. The security branches were largely responsible for restricting internet freedom and access; internet blackouts often coincided with security force attacks. The government censored websites related to the opposition, including the websites for local coordination committees as well as media outlets.

The government also restricted or prohibited internet access in areas under siege. It obstructed connectivity through its control of key infrastructure, at times shutting the internet and mobile telephone networks entirely or at particular sites of unrest. There was generally little access to state-run internet service in besieged areas unless users could capture signals clandestinely from rooftops near government-controlled areas. Some towns in opposition-held areas had limited internet access via satellite connections. Some activists reportedly gained access independently to satellite internet or through second- and third-generation (2G and 3G) cell phone network coverage.

The government meanwhile expanded its efforts to use social media, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, to spread progovernment propaganda and manipulate online content. Government authorities routinely tortured and beat journalists to extract passwords for social media sites, and the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), a group of

progovernment computer hackers, frequently launched cyberattacks on websites to disable them and post progovernment material. In addition to promoting hacking and conducting surveillance, the government and groups that it supported, such as the SEA, reportedly planted malware to target human rights activists, opposition members, and journalists. Local human rights groups blamed government personnel for instances in which malware infected activists' computers. Arbitrary arrests raised fears that authorities could arrest internet users at any time for online activities perceived to threaten the government's control, such as posting on a blog, tweeting, commenting on Facebook, sharing a photograph, or uploading a video.

Observers also accused the SEA of slowing internet access to force self-censorship on government critics and diverting email traffic to government servers for surveillance.

According to the International Telecommunication Union, 34 percent of individuals used the internet and 45 percent of households had internet access at home in 2017.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND CULTURAL EVENTS

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Authorities generally did not permit academic personnel to express ideas contrary to government policy. Authorities reportedly dismissed or imprisoned university professors in government-held areas for expressing dissent and killed some for supporting regime opponents. Combatants on all sides of the war attacked or commandeered schools. The Ministry of Culture restricted and banned the screening of certain films.

During the conflict students, particularly those residing in opposition-held areas, continued to face challenges in taking nationwide exams. For example, school districts in besieged areas of eastern Ghouta suspended activities intermittently through April due to government assaults. Areas liberated by the SDF from ISIS reopened local schools. For example, thousands of children in Raqqa city returned to school in August and September in refurbished buildings previously used or destroyed by ISIS. Many school buildings required extensive repairs, sometimes including clearance of explosive remnants of the war, and administrators required assistance to obtain basic supplies for learning.

In September the government barred actor Samer Ismail from leaving the country to attend the Venice Film Festival in Italy, where his film *The Day I Lost My Shadow* was due to be shown. Local media reported that every man between the ages of 17 and 42 must obtain approval from the conscription office before leaving the country, which Ismail reportedly had not done.

In September multiple news outlets reported that the SDF, PYD, and its ally, the Syriac Union Party, temporarily closed 14 private Assyrian and Chaldean Catholic schools in the cities of Qamishli, Hasakeh, and Al-Malikiyeh for their refusal to cease teaching the Syrian regime's curriculum and implement new school curriculum. The schools, administered by the Syriac Orthodox Church Diocese, had been in operation since 1935, serving Assyrian, Armenian, Arab, and Kurdish communities in the area. The Kurdish authorities and the local Syriac Orthodox Archbishopric eventually reached an agreement

that allowed the schools to reopen. Samira Haj Ali, head of the Kurdish authority's education authority, said the agreement ensured students in the first two grades followed a Syriac version of the Syrian Interim Government's curriculum, a slight variation of the regime curriculum excluding Ba'athist ideological components. In exchange, the agreement allowed students in grades three to six to follow the Damascus education curriculum with extra Syriac language classes available.

ISIS and the HTS sought to restrict academic freedom severely and to curtail cultural events they considered un-Islamic. Schools in ISIS-controlled territories banned several academic subjects, including chemistry and philosophy, but ISIS territories diminished significantly during the year.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The government limited freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

The constitution provides for the freedom of peaceful assembly, but the law grants the government broad powers to restrict this freedom.

The Ministry of Interior requires permission for demonstrations or any public gathering of more than three persons. As a rule, the ministry authorized only demonstrations by the government, affiliated groups, or the Baath Party, orchestrating them on numerous occasions.

According to allegations by Kurdish activists and press reporting, the PYD and the YPG sometimes suppressed freedom of assembly in areas under their control. During the year, however, hundreds of Christians and Assyrians peacefully protested against PYD policy to close private religious schools that teach the Syrian regime's curriculum. Kurdish security forces fired weapons into the air but reportedly did not otherwise engage the protesters. Similar protests in Hasaka against forcible recruitment also appear to have occurred without serious incident.

During the year multiple media outlets reported that HTS loosened restrictions on civil society activity, including protests, due to popular pressure for engagement to oppose an expected assault by government and progovernment forces on the Idlib Governorate. This approach was manifested in September, when substantial numbers protested against President Assad and the government in opposition- and HTS-held areas of Idlib and Hama.

The COI reported that residents who previously resided in ISIS-controlled Raqqa noted severe restrictions on assembly while under ISIS rule, but ISIS territories contracted considerably during the year.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

The constitution provides for the freedom of association, but the law grants the government latitude to restrict this freedom. The government required prior registration and approval for private associations and restricted the activities of associations and their members. The executive boards of professional associations were not independent of the government.

The government often denied requests for registration or failed to act on them, reportedly on political grounds. None of the local human rights organizations operated with a license but many functioned under organizations that had requisite government registration. The government continued to block the multiyear effort by journalists to register a countrywide media association. Despite government efforts, journalists in exile founded the Syrian Journalist Association as an independent democratic professional association in 2012 to empower the role of freedom of the press and expression in Syria.

The government selectively enforced the 2011 decree allowing the establishment of independent political parties, permitting only progovernment groups to form official parties (see section 3). According to local human rights groups, opposition activists declined to organize parties, fearing the government would use party lists to target opposition members.

Under laws that criminalize membership and activity in illegal organizations as determined by the government, security forces detained hundreds of persons linked to local human rights groups and prodemocracy student groups. The thousands of death notices released by the government during the year shed light on this practice. For example, the *Atlantic* described the fates of many of the young protest organizers, civil society leaders, and local coordination committee members forcibly disappeared by the government in 2011. These included Yahya and Ma'an Shurbaji; both had been missing since 2011 and were now listed as having died in government detention in 2013. The government also searched these individuals' personal and social media contacts for further potential targets.

HTS restricted the activities of organizations it deemed incompatible with its interpretation of Islam. For example, in its March report, the COI describes how in 2015 the HTS predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra group burned a women's organization in Idlib, stole the organizer's car, and detained the organizer for a short period. In 2017 the March COI report noted that HTS prevented NGOs in Idlib from conducting meetings with mixed participants so a number of NGOs began holding meetings via remote presence.

According to previous media reports and reports from former residents of ISIS-controlled areas, ISIS did not permit the existence of associations that opposed the structures or policies of the "caliphate."

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution provides for freedom of movement “within the territories of the state unless restricted by a judicial decision or by the implementation of laws,” but the government, ISIS, and other armed groups restricted internal movement and travel and instituted security checkpoints to monitor such travel throughout the regions under their respective control. Government sieges in Homs, Damascus, rural Damascus, Deir al-Zour, and Idlib Governorates restricted the freedom of movement and resulted in documented cases of death, starvation, and severe malnutrition, while forced evacuations following sieges resulted in mass displacement and additional breakdowns in service provision and humanitarian assistance (see section 1.g.).

The government inconsistently cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern. The government provided some cooperation to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: Both government and opposition forces reportedly besieged, shelled, and otherwise made inaccessible some Palestinian refugee camps, neighborhoods, and sites, which resulted in severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care and humanitarian assistance, and civilian deaths.

In-country Movement: In government-besieged cities throughout the country, government forces blocked humanitarian access, leading to severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care, and death. The violence, coupled with significant cultural pressure, severely restricted the movement of women in many areas. Additionally, the law allows certain male relatives to place travel bans on women.

The government expanded security checkpoints into civilian areas to monitor and limit movement. Government forces reportedly used snipers to prevent protests, enforce curfews, target opposition forces, and, in some cases, prevent civilians from fleeing besieged towns. The government also barred foreign diplomats from visiting most parts of the country and rarely granted them permission to travel outside Damascus. The consistently high level and unpredictability of violence severely restricted movement throughout the country.

In areas they still controlled, armed opposition groups and terrorist groups such as HTS and ISIS also restricted movement, including with checkpoints (see section 1.g.). According to the COI, long desert detour routes exposed drivers and passengers to arbitrary arrest, unlawful search and seizure of property, demands for bribes, and detention and execution at checkpoints administered by ISIS, the government, and other armed actors.

While the SDC and SDF generally supported IDP communities in northeast Syria, in July HRW claimed that the SDC and members of the Kurdish Autonomous Administration operating in Deir al-Zour and Raqqa confiscated the identification cards of IDPs in camps and prevented their freedom of movement. According to UN and HRW allegations, the SDF in some instances required IDPs to obtain “sponsorship” to move to traditionally Kurdish areas controlled by the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Qamishli, Hasakeh, and Kobani.

In the remaining areas under its control, ISIS restricted the movement of government supporters or assumed supporters, especially the Alawite and Shia populations, as well as Yezidi, Christian, and other captives. ISIS reportedly did not permit female passengers to traverse territory it controlled unless accompanied by a close male relative.

Foreign Travel: While citizens have the right to travel internationally, the government denied passports and other vital documents based on the applicant’s political views, association with opposition groups, or ties to geographic areas where the opposition dominated. The government also imposed exit visa requirements and routinely closed the Damascus airport and border crossings, claiming the closures were due to violence or threats of violence. For example, local media reported that every man between the ages of 17 and 42 must obtain approval from the conscription office before leaving the country. Additionally, the government often banned travel by human rights or civil society activists, their families, and affiliates. Many citizens reportedly learned of the ban against their travel only when authorities prevented them from departing the country. The government reportedly applied travel bans without explanation or explicit duration, including in cases when individuals sought to travel for health reasons. The government comprehensively banned international travel of opposition members, often targeting any such individual who attempted to travel. Local media and human rights groups repeatedly stated that opposition activists and their families hesitated to leave the country, fearing attacks at airports and border crossings.

The government also often refused to allow citizens to return. According to numerous media outlets, Major General Abbas Ibrahim, head of Lebanon’s General Security directorate, stated that in coordinating the return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon, the Syrian government reviews a list of names and “on average” rejects 10 percent of them.

Syrians born abroad to parents who fled the conflict and remained in refugee camps generally did not have access to Syrian citizenship documents. The government allowed Syrians living outside of the country, whose passports expired, to renew their passports at consulates. Many who fled as refugees, however, feared reporting to the government against which they may have protested or feared the government could direct reprisals against family members still in the country.

Women older than age 18 have the legal right to travel without the permission of male relatives, but a husband may file a request with the Interior Ministry to prohibit his wife from departing the country.

There were reports ISIS destroyed Syrian passports and legal records and produced its own passports, not recognized by any country or entity. These policies disproportionately affected children, because many left the country before obtaining a passport or identification card. ISIS explicitly prohibited women from foreign travel.

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS)

During the year violence continued to be the primary reason for displacement, much of it attributed to government and Russian aerial attacks. Government and progovernment evacuations of besieged areas, often overseen by Russian forces, forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of persons. Years of conflict and evacuations repeatedly displaced persons, and each displacement depleted family assets. In September the United Nations estimated there were more than 6.2 million IDPs in the country, including 1.5 million new IDPs since the start of the year. The United Nations estimated that 750,000 IDPs returned to their places of origin during the first half of the year. Up to 1.2 million persons lived in UN-designated hard-to-reach areas. UN humanitarian officials reported that most IDPs sought shelter with host communities or in collective centers, abandoned buildings, or informal camps. The humanitarian response to the country was coordinated through a complex bureaucratic structure. The crisis inside the country continued to meet the UN criteria for a level 3 response—the global humanitarian system’s classification for response to the most severe, large-scale humanitarian crises.

The government generally did not provide sustainable access to services for IDPs, did not offer IDPs assistance or protection, did not facilitate humanitarian assistance for IDPs, and provided inconsistent protection. The government forcibly displaced populations from besieged areas and restricted movement of IDPs. The government did not promote the safe, voluntary, and dignified return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs and, in many cases, refused to allow IDPs to return home. Seven Syrians who had attempted to return to their homes in Darayya and Qaboun, or whose immediate relatives attempted to return in May and July, told HRW that they or their relatives were unable to access their residential or commercial properties. According to HRW, the government was imposing town-wide restrictions on access to Darayya and in Qaboun the government either had restricted access to their neighborhoods or had demolished the property of the Syrians attempting to return. The government routinely disrupted the supply of humanitarian aid, including medical assistance, to areas under siege as well as to newly recaptured areas (see section 1.g.).

The SARC functioned as the main partner for international humanitarian organizations working inside the country to provide humanitarian assistance in government and some opposition-controlled areas. NGOs operating from Damascus faced government bureaucratic obstruction in attempting to provide humanitarian assistance. UN agencies and NGOs sought to increase the flow of assistance to opposition-held areas subject to government offensives to meet growing humanitarian needs, but the government increasingly restricted cross-line operations originating from Damascus. Cross-border operations from Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq, provided humanitarian assistance, but these halted from Jordan in June when the government retook territory in the southwest up to

the Syria-Jordan border. While humanitarian aid was provided cross-border from Turkey to northwest Syria (Idlib and Aleppo) via two border crossings, Turkey prohibited the provision of humanitarian and stabilization aid to areas of northeast Syria from Turkey.

Assistance reached some hard-to-reach locations, but the government continued to hinder UN and NGO access, and the government secured control over many of these areas during the year. For example, humanitarian organizations reported throughout the summer that the government did not permit UN agencies the sustained access required to conduct detailed needs assessments for vulnerable populations in Quneitra. The United Nations reported that as of November only seven humanitarian assistance convoys had accessed hard-to-reach areas during the year, providing assistance to approximately 220,000 persons.

In early November the United Nations and SARC delivered humanitarian assistance to approximately 50,000 persons in need at Rukban camp in southeast Syria near the Jordanian border. Additionally, the convoy provided an emergency vaccination campaign to protect some 5,000 children against measles, polio, and other diseases. The overall humanitarian situation in Rukban camp had reached a dire state, with reported shortages of basic commodities, protection concerns, increasing violence, and the death of several children who reportedly were unable to obtain the further medical treatment they needed, according to the United Nations. Prior to the delivery of humanitarian goods, the last UN delivery of assistance to Rukban was in January, delivered through Jordan. Prior to the November delivery, the government refused to authorize a convoy to travel from Damascus to Rukban.

Armed opposition groups, and terrorist groups such as HTS and ISIS, also impeded humanitarian assistance to IDPs. For example, in March the United Nations criticized the Turkish-backed armed opposition groups, including the FSA, for providing inconsistent, restricted access to IDPs in Afrin. In October the United Kingdom temporarily suspended the delivery of aid to Syria's northwestern Idlib Province due to HTS taxes on aid trucks. The United Kingdom subsequently resumed aid delivery and, as of November, was still delivering aid to Idlib Province. The SDF and SDC generally facilitated the safe and voluntary return of IDPs during the year, particularly to Raqqa.

PROTECTION OF REFUGEES

Refoulement: UNHCR maintained that conditions for refugee return to Syria in safety and dignity were not yet in place and did not promote, nor facilitate, the return of refugees to Syria during the year. In July, however, the government and Russia began a diplomatic campaign to encourage the return of refugees to Syria. While Russia reportedly was eager to use the return of Syrian refugees as a means to secure international donations for Syria reconstruction efforts, the Syrian government adopted a more cautious approach on promoting the return of refugees, reportedly due to the government's suspicion that many Syrian refugees supported the opposition.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. UNHCR and UNRWA were able to maintain limited protection areas for refugees and asylum seekers, although violence hampered access to vulnerable populations. In coordination with both local and international NGOs, the United Nations continued to provide such individuals essential services and assistance.

Employment: The law does not explicitly grant refugees, except for Palestinians, the right to work. While the government rarely granted non-Palestinian refugees a work permit, many refugees found work in the informal sector as guards, construction workers, street vendors, and in other manual jobs.

Access to Basic Services: The law allows for the issuance of identity cards to Palestinian refugees and the same access to basic services provided to citizens. The government also allowed Iraqi refugees access to publicly available services, such as health care and education, but residency permits were available only to those refugees who entered the country legally and possessed a valid passport, which did not include all refugees. The lack of access to residency permits issued by authorities exposed refugees to risks of harassment and exploitation, and severely affected their access to public services. The approximately 48,000 non-Palestinian refugees and asylum seekers in the country faced growing protection risks, multiple displacements, tightened security procedures at checkpoints, and difficulty obtaining required residency permits, all of which resulted in restrictions on their freedom of movement. UNHCR reported a rise in sexual- and gender-based violence and child-protection concerns among refugees, including child labor, school dropouts, and early marriages.

STATELESS PERSONS

Following the 1962 census, approximately 150,000 Kurds lost their citizenship. A legislative decree had ordained the single-day census in 1962, and the government executed it unannounced with regard to the inhabitants of al-Hasakah Governorate. Anyone not registered for any reason or without all required paperwork became “foreign” from that day onward. The government at the time argued it based its decision on a 1945 wave of alleged illegal immigration of Kurds from neighboring states, including Turkey, to Hasakah, where they allegedly “fraudulently” registered as Syrian citizens. In a similar fashion, authorities recorded anyone who refused to participate as “undocumented.” Because of this loss of citizenship, these Kurds and their descendants lacked identity cards and could not access government services, including health care and education. They also faced social and economic discrimination. Stateless Kurds do not have the right to inherit or bequeath assets, and their lack of citizenship or identity documents restricted their travel to and from the country.

In 2011 President Assad decreed that stateless Kurds in al-Hasakah Governorate who were registered as “foreigners” could apply for citizenship. It was unclear how many Kurds benefited from the decree. UNHCR reported that approximately 40,000 of these

Kurds remained unable to obtain citizenship. Likewise, the decree did not extend to the approximately 160,000 “unregistered” stateless Kurds. The change from 150,000 to 160,000 reflected an approximate increase in population since the 1962 census.

Children derive citizenship solely from their father. Because women cannot confer nationality on their children, an unknown number of children whose fathers were missing or deceased due to the continuing conflict were at risk of statelessness. Mothers could not pass citizenship to children born outside the country, including in neighboring countries operating refugee camps. Children who left the country during the conflict also experienced difficulties obtaining identification necessary to prove citizenship and obtain services.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

Although the constitution provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage, citizens were not able to exercise that ability. Outcomes reflected underlying circumstances of elections that impeded and coerced the will of the electorate.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Municipal elections were held on September 16 with approximately 40,000 candidates vying for more than 18,000 council seats in areas controlled by the government. According to media outlets, opposition figures claimed a low turnout because most Syrians considered the elections to be of limited value. Opposition sources, according to *Al-Monitor*, alleged the government forced civil servants to cast their votes. Multiple reports indicated the government denied access to ballot boxes to Syrians residing in Daraa Province, which the government brought under its control earlier this year following a military offensive. According to observers the results were rigged in favor of the ruling Baath Party. Most of the candidates were either from the Baath Party or associated with it.

In 2016 the country held geographically limited parliamentary elections, the results of which citizens living outside government control rejected. The 2014 presidential election, in which Bashar Assad ostensibly received 88.7 percent of the vote, was neither free nor fair by international standards. Voters faced intimidation by government security forces, and the government forcibly transported state employees in Damascus to polling centers, according to observers and media. Media reports described low overall voter turnout, even among those living in relatively stable areas with access to polling stations. Authorities allowed only persons in government-controlled territory, certain refugee areas, and refugees who left the country after obtaining official permission to vote.

In September 2017 Kurdish authorities held elections for leaders of local “communes” in an effort to establish new governing institutions to augment regional autonomy. The Syrian regime does not recognize the Kurdish enclave or the elections. The Kurdish National Council (KNC, a rival to the PYD) called for a boycott, terming the elections “a flagrant violation of the will of the Kurdish people.” Media outlets reported that the

election was monitored by a small group of foreign experts, including a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which runs the Kurdish Regional Government in neighboring Iraq.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The constitution provides that the Baath Party is the ruling party and assures that it has a majority in all government and popular associations, such as workers' and women's groups. The Baath Party and nine smaller satellite political parties constituted the coalition National Progressive Front. The Baath-led National Progressive Front dominated the 250-member People's Council, holding 200 of the 250 parliament seats following the 2016 election. A 2011 decree allows for the establishment of additional political parties but forbids those based on religion, tribal affiliation, or regional interests.

Membership in the Baath Party or close familial relationships with a prominent party member or powerful government official assisted in economic, social, and educational advancement. Party or government connections made it easier to gain admission to better schools, access lucrative employment, and achieve greater advancement and power within the government, military, and security services. The government reserved certain prominent positions, such as provincial governorships, solely for Baath Party members.

The government showed little tolerance for other political parties, including those allied with the Baath Party in the National Progressive Front. The government harassed parties such as the Communist Union Movement, Communist Action Party, and Arab Social Union. Police arrested members of banned Islamist parties, including Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria. Reliable data on illegal political parties was unavailable.

The PYD generally controlled the political and governance landscape in northeast Syria while allowing for Arab representation in local governance councils. The PYD, however, maintained overall control of critical decisions made by local councils. PYD-affiliated internal security forces at times reportedly detained and forcibly disappeared perceived opponents, and Assyrian and Chaldean protesters accused it of incorporating political indoctrination in the public school curriculum. In June the Washington Institute reported that these forces arrested KNC leaders, burned KNC offices, and prevented KNC members from holding meetings and conferences. The arrests follow a long-standing dispute between the KNC and the PYD, in which the latter accuses the former of working with Turkey and the Syrian opposition to undermine the PYD's governance apparatus in northeast Syria.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit participation of women or members of minorities in the political process, and they did participate. Although there were no formal restrictions, cultural and social barriers largely excluded women from decision-making positions. The government formed after the 2014 election included three female members: Vice President Najah al-Attar, Minister of State for Environmental Affairs Nazira Serkis, and Minister of Social Affairs Rima al-Qadiri. In 2016, 13 percent of members of parliament were women. There were Christian, Druze, and Kurdish members in parliament. In 2017 Hammouda Sabbagh became the first Orthodox Christian elected

speaker of parliament. Alawites, the ruling religious minority, held greater political power in the cabinet than other minorities as well as more authority than the majority Sunni sect did.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

Although the law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, the government did not implement the law effectively. Officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were numerous reports of government corruption during the year. Corruption continued to be a pervasive problem in police forces, security services, migration management agencies, and throughout the government.

Corruption: Due to the lack of free press and opposition access to instruments of government and media, there was almost no detailed information about corruption, except petty corruption. Freedom House reported that to secure its support base the government regularly distributed patronage in the form of public resources and implemented policies to benefit favored industries and companies. Authorities reportedly awarded government contracts and trade deals to allies like Iran and Russia, possibly as compensation for political and military aid. Basic state services and humanitarian aid reportedly were extended or withheld based on a community's demonstrated political loyalty to the government, providing additional leverage for bribe-seeking officials.

For example, President Bashar Assad's cousin, Rami Makhoul, reportedly was known as "Mr. 5 Percent" or "Mr. 10 Percent," depending on the size of the deal. As late as 2011, Makhoul reportedly controlled 60 percent of the country's economy. The Panama Papers, Swissleaks, and most recently the Paradise Papers chronicled his money laundering and sanctions busting activities. In April the *Anticorruption Digest* reported that Makhoul stands to benefit from the presidential decree addressing confiscation of unregistered properties (see section 1.e.).

Human rights lawyers and family members of detainees stated that government officials in courts and prisons solicited bribes for favorable decisions and provision of basic services. For example, the *New York Times* reported in February that artist Najah al-Bukai won his release from detention at Branch 227 after his wife bribed officials with more than 10 million Syrian pounds (\$20,000).

Financial Disclosure: There are no public financial disclosure laws for public officials.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

The government restricted attempts to investigate alleged human rights violations, criminalized their publication, and refused to cooperate with any independent attempts to investigate alleged violations. The government did not grant permission for the formation of any domestic human rights organizations. Nevertheless, hundreds of such groups operated illegally in the country.

The government was highly suspicious of international human rights NGOs and did not allow them into the country. The government normally responded to queries from human rights organizations and foreign embassies regarding specific cases by denying the facts of the case or by reporting that the case was still under investigation, the prisoner in question had violated national security laws, or, if the case was in criminal court, the executive branch could not interfere with the judiciary. The government denied organizations access to locations where government agents launched assaults on antigovernment protesters or allegedly held prisoners detained on political grounds. The United Nations reported that the government also actively restricted the activities of humanitarian aid organizations, especially along supply routes and access points near opposition-controlled areas (see section 1.g.).

There were numerous reports the government harassed domestic human rights activists by subjecting them to regular surveillance and travel bans, property seizure, detention, torture, forcible disappearance, and extrajudicial killings. For example, human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq and his assistant, Mohamed Zaza, reportedly disappeared from a government checkpoint near Damascus in 2012. HRW reported the government moved the two men among various detention facilities in Damascus, including the Palestine Branch, a detention center run by Military Intelligence. In October the SOHR again called on the government for information on the welfare and whereabouts of Ma'touq and Zaza.

Terrorist groups, including ISIS, violently attacked organizations and individuals seeking to investigate human rights abuses or advocate for improved practices. The SDF and other opposition groups occasionally imposed restrictions on human rights organizations or harassed individual activists.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The government continued to deny access for the COI, mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to document and report on human rights violations and abuses in the country. It did not cooperate fully with numerous UN bodies, resulting in restrictions on access for humanitarian organizations, especially to opposition-controlled areas.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape and sexual assault of women, men, and children, but the government did not enforce the law effectively. Rape is punishable by imprisonment and hard labor of at least 15 years (at least nine years in mitigating circumstances), which is aggravated if the perpetrator is a government official, religious official, or has legitimate or actual authority over the victim; male rape is punishable by imprisonment up to three years. The law specifically excludes spousal rape, and it reduces or suspends punishment if the rapist marries the victim. The victim's family sometimes agreed to this arrangement to avoid the social stigma attached to rape.

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and other UN agencies, NGOs, and media characterized rape and sexual violence as endemic, underreported, and uncontrolled in the country. Humanitarian organizations reported that women, men, and community leaders consistently identified sexual violence as a primary reason their families fled the country. In March the COI reported that government and progovernment forces regularly used rape and sexual violence to terrorize and punish women, men, and children perceived as associated with the opposition, as did terrorist groups such as HTS and ISIS. There were instances, comparatively far fewer, of armed opposition groups reportedly raping women and children. HTS and ISIS also reportedly forced women and girls into sexual slavery (see sections 1.a., 1.c., and 1.g.).

The law does not specifically prohibit domestic violence, but it stipulates that men may discipline their female relatives in a form permitted by general custom. According to a November 2017 UNFPA report, violence against women and children was pervasive and increasing due to conflict and the lack of economic opportunity for men. Victims did not report the vast majority of cases. Security forces consistently treated violence against women as a social rather than a criminal matter. Observers reported that when some abused women tried to file a police report, police did not investigate their reports thoroughly, if at all, and that in other cases police officers responded by abusing the women.

In previous years several domestic violence centers operated in Damascus; the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor licensed them. Local NGOs reported, however, that many centers no longer operated due to the conflict. There were no known government-run services for women outside Damascus. According to local human rights organizations, local coordination committees and other opposition-related groups offered programming specifically for protection of women; NGOs did not integrate these programs throughout the country, and none reported reliable funding.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: The law permits judges to reduce penalties for murder and assault if the defendant asserts an “honor” defense, which often occurred. The government kept no official statistics on use of this defense in murder and assault cases and reportedly rarely pursued prosecution of so-called honor crimes. There were no officially reported honor killings during the year, but UNFPA reported in November 2017 that honor killings increased since the onset of the crisis in 2011 due to increased sexual violence and lawlessness. For example, UNFPA cited an adolescent girl in Mare, Aleppo, whose friend reportedly was killed by her father when she returned after being kidnapped. To protect their daughters, UNFPA reported that many families arranged for them to marry earlier, leading to an increase in early and forced marriage. NGOs working with refugees reported families killed some rape victims inside the country, including those raped by government forces, for reasons of honor.

The terrorist groups ISIS and HTS permitted and committed so-called honor killings in territories under their control (see section 1.g.).

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of gender but does not explicitly prohibit sexual harassment. The government did not enforce the law effectively. Sexual harassment was pervasive, uncontrolled, and increasing, according to a November 2017 report by UNFPA. For example, UNFPA cited an adolescent girl from Saraqab, Idlib, who said she formerly returned from university in Aleppo at night without any problems but that harassment of girls has spread, even in the daytime; her parents became worried and prevented her from leaving home.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization by the government, but previous reports from Iraq and NGOs such as Yazda and the Free Yezidi Foundation found that ISIS forced Yezidi women whom they had impregnated to have abortions. There were reports that ISIS transferred some Yezidi women captives from Iraq to Syria, and the COI reported in March that some ISIS fighters were seen fleeing Raqqa and Deir al-Zour in 2017 with women believed to be Yezidi captives (see section 1.g.).

Discrimination: Although the constitution provides for equality between men and women, the law does not provide for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. Criminal, family, religious, personal status, labor, nationality, inheritance, retirement, and social security laws discriminate against women.

For example, if a man and a woman separately commit the same criminal act of adultery, then by law the woman's punishment is double that of the man's. The law generally permits women to initiate divorce proceedings against their spouses, but the law does not entitle a divorced woman to alimony in some cases. Under the law a divorced mother loses the right to guardianship and physical custody of her sons when they reach age 13 and of her daughters at age 15, when guardianship transfers to the paternal side of the family. For Muslims in particular, personal status law discriminates against women. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. Some personal status laws mirror sharia regardless of the religion of those involved in the case. While the constitution provides the "right of every citizen to earn his wage according to the nature and yield of the work," the law does not explicitly stipulate equal pay for equal work. Women cannot pass citizenship to their children. The government's interpretation of sharia is the basis of inheritance law for all citizens except Christians. Accordingly, courts usually granted Muslim women half of the inheritance share of male heirs. In all communities, male heirs must provide financial support to female relatives who inherit less. If they do not, women have the right to sue.

The law provides women and men equal rights in owning or managing land or other property, but cultural and religious norms impeded women's property rights, especially in rural areas.

Before the conflict began, 13 percent of women participated in the formal labor force, compared with 73 percent of men. Both male and female employment participation decreased as violence and insecurity increased, (The International Labor Organization estimated female employment fell by slightly more than 1 percent while male employment

fell by almost 3 percent from 2011 to 2017). UNFPA reported local female employment participation increased in Damascus, Raqqa, Daraa, and elsewhere since the need to support the family forced women to work because many men could no longer do so.

The Commission for Family Affairs, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor shared responsibility for attempting to accord equal legal rights to women. Governmental involvement in civil rights claims, including cases against sexual discrimination, was stagnant, and most claims went unanswered.

Women participated in public life and in most professions, including the armed forces, although UNFPA reported that violence and lawlessness in many regions reduced women's access to the public sphere. Various sources observed that women constituted a minority of lawyers, university professors, and other professions.

The terrorist groups ISIS and HTS reportedly placed similar discriminatory restrictions on women and girls in the territories they controlled. For example, in March the COI reported that HTS or ISIS or both: forced women and girls into marriage; imposed a dress code on women and girls; banned women and girls from wearing makeup; required that women and girls must be accompanied by a "mahram" or male member of their immediate family; forbade women from speaking with unrelated men or hosting men who were not their husband; forbade widows from living alone; banned women's centers; banned meetings with mixed male and female participation; and segregated classrooms. Both ISIS and HTS maintained all-female police units to support the Hisbah in enforcing these regulations, sometimes violently, among women. Summary punishments for infractions ranged from corporal punishment such as lashing to execution.

Children

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship solely from their father. In large areas of the country where civil registries were not functioning, authorities did not register births. The government did not register the births of Kurdish noncitizen residents, including stateless Kurds (see section 2.d., Stateless Persons). Failure to register resulted in deprivation of services, such as diplomas for high school-level studies, access to universities, access to formal employment, and civil documentation and protection.

Education: The government provided free public education to citizen children from primary school through university. Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of six and 12. Enrollment, attendance, and completion rates for boys and girls generally were comparable. Noncitizen children could also attend public schools at no cost but required permission from the Ministry of Education. While Palestinians and other noncitizens, including stateless Kurds, could generally send their children to school and universities, stateless Kurds were ineligible to receive a degree documenting their academic achievement.

The conflict and widespread destruction continued to hamper the ability of children to attend school. In June the Assistance Coordination Unit, a local NGO, reported that only 9 percent of the assessed functional schools provided upper secondary education, 36

percent offered lower secondary education, 56 percent offered primary education, and almost one-third of the assessed schools did not separate the various teaching levels.

The terrorist groups, ISIS and HTS, reportedly imposed their interpretation of sharia on schools and discriminated against girls in the territories they controlled. For example, in March the COI reported that HTS and ISIS: segregated classrooms by gender, dismissed students for dress code violations, imposed their curriculum on teachers, and closed private schools and educational centers. ISIS also banned several basic education subjects, such as chemistry and philosophy.

Child Abuse: The law does not specifically prohibit child abuse, but it stipulates that parents may discipline their children in a form permitted by general custom. According to a November 2017 UNFPA report, violence against children, especially girls, was pervasive and increasing due to conflict and the lack of economic opportunity for men.

There were reports of government and progovernment forces, as well as the terrorist groups HTS and ISIS, sexually assaulting, torturing, detaining, killing, and otherwise abusing children (see sections 1.a., 1.b., 1.c., and 1.g.). In July Urnammu reported extensively on such abuses.

The terrorist groups HTS and ISIS subjected children to extremely harsh punishment, including execution, in the territories they controlled (see section 1.g.).

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal age for marriage is 18 for men and 17 for women. A boy as young as 15 or a girl as young as 13 may marry if a judge deems both parties willing and “physically mature” and if the fathers or grandfathers of both parties consent. Early and forced marriages were increasingly common, as were abusive temporary marriages.

In November 2017 UNFPA reported early marriage had evolved from a cultural practice to an increasingly used coping mechanism during the war. Many families reportedly arranged marriages for girls, including at younger ages than pre-2011, believing that it would protect them and ease the financial burden on the family.

There were instances of early and forced marriage of girls to members of government, progovernment, and armed opposition forces.

In previous years ISIS abducted and sexually exploited Yezidi girls in Iraq and transported them to Syria for rape and forced marriage; many of those Yezidi women and girls remained captive during the year (see section 1.g. and section 6, Women). In March the COI reported that ISIS perceived unmarried women and girls older than the age of puberty as a threat to social order. As a result, from 2014 onwards, ISIS began to marry forcibly Sunni (also minority) girls and women living in territories under its control. Some of those forced to marry ISIS members were adults, including widows, but the vast majority of cases the COI documented revealed that girls between 12 and 16 years old were victims of forced marriage. Many women and girls reportedly were passed among multiple ISIS fighters, some as many as six or seven times within two years. HTS also reportedly forced Druze and other minority women and girls into marriage, as well as Sunni women and girls.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law stipulates penalties for those found guilty of certain forms of child abuse associated with trafficking crimes, including kidnapping and forced prostitution, both of which carry a penalty of up to three years in prison. The law considers child pornography a trafficking crime, but the punishment for child pornography was set at the local level with “appropriate penalties.” It was also unclear if there had been any prosecutions for child pornography or if authorities enforced the law.

The age of sexual consent by law is 15 with no close-in-age exemption. Premarital sex is illegal, but observers reported authorities did not enforce the law. Rape of a child under the age of 15 is punishable by not less than 21 years’ imprisonment and hard labor. There were no reports of government prosecution of child rape cases.

Child Soldiers: Several sources documented the continued unlawful recruitment and use of children in combat (see section 1.g.).

Displaced Children: There was a large population of IDP children and some refugee children as well. These children reportedly experienced increased vulnerability to abuses, including by armed forces (see sections 1.c., 1.g., and 2.d.).

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State’s *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data.html>.

Anti-Semitism

In 2016 NGOs estimated fewer than 20—perhaps fewer than 10—Jews remained in the country. The national school curriculum did not include materials on tolerance education or the Holocaust. There is no designation of religion on passports or national identity cards, except for Jews.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law protects the rights of persons with disabilities, including their access to education, employment, health services, and other state services, but the government did not enforce these provisions effectively. The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities and seeks to integrate them into the workforce, reserving 4 percent of government jobs and 2 percent of private-sector jobs for persons with disabilities. Private-sector businesses are eligible for tax exemptions after hiring persons with disabilities.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for assisting persons with disabilities, and it worked through dedicated charities and organizations to provide assistance. Authorities did not fully document the number of persons with disabilities, but

the NGO Humanity and Inclusion (HI, formerly Handicap International) reported in April that 30,000 new conflict-related trauma cases per month were leading to thousands of permanent disabilities. According to the local NGO Syria Relief, persons with disabilities remained among the most hidden, neglected, and socially excluded of all displaced persons in the country. They reportedly were not often recognized or calculated in record-keeping and data-collection exercises, contributing to neglect.

The destruction of schools and hospitals, most often by government and progovernment forces, limited access to education and health services for persons with disabilities, but government and nongovernment social care institutes reportedly existed for blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, and physical and intellectual disabilities. The government did not effectively work to provide access for persons with disabilities to information, communications, building, or transportation. In its November 2017 report, UNFPA detailed how educational institutions, early childcare centers, Quranic schools, and women's centers often were easily accessible to community members with the exception of the elderly and persons with disabilities. UNFPA further stated that persons with disability were sometimes denied aid, as they could not access it, and some distribution centers required presence in person.

According to a 2017 report by the Syria Reliance Consortium of HI and other international NGOs, 50 percent of households surveyed, who counted a member with a disability, suffered from poor food consumption, compared with 34 percent for households without persons with a disability. In April HI reported that women and girls with disabilities were three times more likely to experience gender-based violence compared with nondisabled women. For example, in a November 2017 report, UNFPA cited the case of a young man in Sweida who lured and raped a disabled girl playing in the street by offering her candy. There was no indication that the government effectively investigated or punished those responsible for violence and abuses against persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The government actively restricted national and ethnic minorities from conducting traditional, religious, and cultural activities. The Kurdish population—citizens and noncitizens—faced official and societal discrimination and repression as well as government-sponsored violence. Government and progovernment forces, as well as ISIS and armed opposition forces such as the Turkish-backed FSA, reportedly arrested, detained, tortured, killed, and otherwise abused numerous Kurdish activists and individuals, as well as members of the SDF, during the year (see section 1.g.).

The government continued to limit the use and teaching of the Kurdish language. It also restricted publication in Kurdish of books and other materials, Kurdish cultural expression, and at times the celebration of Kurdish festivals.

The Alawite community, to which Bashar Assad belongs, enjoyed privileged status throughout the government and dominated the state security apparatus and military leadership. Nevertheless, the government reportedly also targeted Alawite opposition

activists for arbitrary arrest, torture, detention, and killing. Extremist opposition groups targeted Alawite communities on several occasions for their perceived progovernment stance.

In March the COI reported that armed opposition groups detained hundreds of women and girls belonging to minority groups, particularly Alawites, and used them as bargaining chips for initiating prisoner swaps with government and progovernment forces.

The terrorist groups ISIS and HTS violently oppressed and discriminated against all non-Sunni Arab ethnic minorities in the territories they controlled (see section 1.g.).

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual conduct, defined as “carnal relations against the order of nature,” and punishable by imprisonment up to three years.

In previous years police used this charge to prosecute lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals. There were no reports of prosecutions under the law during the year, but NGO reports indicated the government arrested dozens of LGBTI persons since 2011 on charges such as abusing social values; selling, buying, or consuming illegal drugs; and organizing and promoting “obscene” parties. Local media and NGOs reported instances in which government and progovernment forces used accusations of homosexuality as a pretext to detain, arrest, torture, and kill civilians. The frequency of such instances was difficult to determine, since police rarely reported their rationale for arrests.

Although there were no known domestic NGOs focused on LGBTI matters, there were several online networking communities, including an online LGBTI-oriented magazine. Human rights activists reported there was overt societal discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in all aspects of society.

The terrorist groups ISIS and HTS regularly detained, tortured, and killed LGBTI individuals in the territories they controlled (see section 1.g.). For example, in its March report, the COI described how in 2016 HTS predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra accused two men of being homosexuals, tied their hands behind their backs, announced the accusations of homosexuality over loudspeakers, and threw the two men from the third floor of a building in Sheikhoun, Idlib. Similarly, the COI reported that ISIS executed males, including boys raped by older men, on charges of sodomy and widely circulated videos of the executions to terrorize populations under their control. For example, in its March report, the COI reported that Hisbah belonging to ISIS arrested a teenage boy in Raqqa, charged him with sodomy, and threw him off a building.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

There were no reports of violence or discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS, but human rights activists believed such cases were underreported and the UN Development Program (UNDP) noted that stigma affected access to health care. The Ministry of Health claimed in December 2017 there were 35 known cases of HIV/AIDS in the country, while UNDP estimated there were 450 persons with HIV/AIDS. The UNDP and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria assessed that the incapability of the health-care sector to identify newly infected persons or offer medical support in a hostile environment posed a major problem and added to the risk of further spread of the disease among the general population.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Yezidis, Druze, Christians, and other religious minorities were subject to violence and discrimination by ISIS (see section 1.g.).

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

While the law provides for the right to form and join unions, conduct legal labor strikes, and bargain collectively, there were excessive restrictions on these rights. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination but also allows employers to fire workers at will.

The law requires all unions to belong to the government-affiliated General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU). The law prohibits strikes involving more than 20 workers in certain sectors, including transportation and telecommunications, or strike actions resembling public demonstrations. Restrictions on freedom of association also included fines and prison sentences for illegal strikes.

The law requires that government representatives be part of the bargaining process in the public sector, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor could object to, and refuse to register, any agreements concluded. The law and relevant labor protections do not apply to workers covered under civil service provisions, under which employees neither have nor considered to need collective bargaining rights. The law does not apply to foreign domestic servants, agricultural workers, NGO employees, or informal-sector workers. There are no legal protections for self-employed workers, although they constituted a significant proportion of the total workforce. Foreign workers may join the syndicate representing their profession but may not run for elected positions, with the exception of Palestinians, who may serve as elected officials in unions.

The government did not enforce applicable laws effectively or make any serious attempt to do so during the year. Penalties were not sufficient to deter violations.

The Baath Party dominated the GFTU, and Baath Party doctrine stipulates that its quasi-official constituent unions protect worker rights. The GFTU president was a senior member of the Baath Party, and he and his deputy could attend cabinet meetings on economic affairs. In previous years the GFTU controlled most aspects of union activity,

including which sectors or industries could have unions. It also had the power to disband union governing bodies. Union elections were generally free of direct GFTU interference, but successful campaigns usually required membership in the Baath Party. Because of the GFTU's close ties to the government, the right to bargain collectively did not exist in practical terms. Although the law provides for collective bargaining in the private sector, past government repression dissuaded most workers from exercising this right.

There was little information available on employer practices with regard to antiunion discrimination. Unrest and economic decline during the year caused many workers to lose their private-sector jobs, giving employers the stronger hand in disputes.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law does not prohibit all forms of forced or compulsory labor, and such practices existed. The Syrian Penal Code does not define forced labor. The code states, "Those sentenced to forced labor will be strictly required to do work with difficulty on par with their sex, age, and may be inside or outside of the prison." The Penal Code allows for forced labor as a mandatory or optional sentence for numerous crimes, such as treason. Authorities may sentence convicted prisoners to hard labor, although according to the International Labor Organization, authorities seldom enforced such a sentence. There was little information available on government efforts to enforce relevant laws during the year or on the effectiveness of penalties to deter violations.

Terrorist groups, including ISIS and HTS, reportedly forced, coerced, or fraudulently recruited some foreigners, including migrants from Central Asia, children, and western women to join them. Thousands of Yezidi women and girl captives of ISIS remained missing and were presumed to have served as sex slaves and in domestic servitude (see section 1.g.).

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law provides for the protection of children from exploitation in the workplace and prohibits the worst forms of child labor. There was little publicly available information on enforcement of child labor law. The government generally did not make significant efforts to enforce laws that prevent or eliminate child labor. Independent information and audits regarding government enforcement were not available. The minimum age for most types of nonagricultural labor is 15 or the completion of elementary schooling, whichever occurs first, and the minimum age for employment in industries with heavy work is 17. Parental permission is required for children younger than age 16 to work. Children younger than age 18 may work no more than six hours a day and may not work overtime or during night shifts, weekends, or on official holidays. The law specifies that authorities should apply "appropriate penalties" to violators. Restrictions on child labor do not apply to those who work in family businesses and do not receive a salary.

Child labor occurred in the country in both informal sectors, such as begging, domestic work, and agriculture, as well as in positions related to the conflict, such as lookouts, spies, and informants. Conflict-related work subjected children to significant dangers of retaliation and violence.

Various forces, particularly terrorist groups and government-aligned groups, continued to recruit and use child soldiers (see section 1.g.).

Organized begging rings continued to subject children displaced within the country to forced labor. In October UNICEF reported that 5.3 million children were in need of humanitarian assistance. As of October UNICEF also reported that fighting destroyed, damaged, or occupied one in every three schools; 1.75 million children were out of school (more than 2.6 million Syrian children, including refugees and others in the diaspora); another 1.35 million were at risk for leaving school.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The constitution does not address discrimination based on sexual orientation, age, or HIV-positive status. Since the law criminalizes homosexuality, many persons faced discrimination due to their sexual orientation. Discrimination against persons with disabilities occurred in hiring and access to worksites. Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to certain minority groups (see section 6, National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law divides the public-sector monthly minimum wage into five levels based on job type or level of education, almost all of which fell below the World Bank's poverty indicator of almost 1,000 Syrian pounds (\$1.90) per day. Benefits included compensation for meals, uniforms, and transportation. Most public-sector employees relied on bribery to supplement their income. Private-sector companies usually paid much higher wages, with lower-end wage rates semi-officially set by the government and employer organizations. Many workers in the public and private sectors took additional manual jobs or relied on their extended families to support them.

The public-sector workweek was 35 hours, and the standard private-sector workweek was 40 hours, excluding meals and rest breaks. Hours of work could increase or decrease based on the industry and associated health hazards. The law provides for at least one meal or rest break totaling no less than one hour per day. Employers must schedule hours of work and rest such that workers do not work more than five consecutive hours or 10 hours per day in total. Employers must provide premium pay for overtime work.

The government set occupational safety and health standards. The law includes provisions mandating that employers take appropriate precautions to protect workers from hazards inherent to the nature of work. The law does not protect workers who chose to remove themselves from situations that endanger their health or safety from losing their employment.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is responsible for enforcing the minimum wage and other regulations pertaining to acceptable conditions of work. The Ministries of Health and of Social Affairs and Labor designated officials to inspect worksites for compliance with health and safety standards. Workers could lodge complaints about health and safety conditions with special committees established to adjudicate such cases. Wage and hour regulations as well as occupational health and safety rules do not apply to migrant workers, rendering them more vulnerable to abuse.

There was little information on government enforcement of labor law or working conditions during the year. There were no health and safety inspections reported, and even previous routine inspections of tourist facilities such as hotels and major restaurants no longer occurred. The enforcement of labor law was lax in both rural and urban areas, since many inspector positions were vacant due to the violence, and their number was insufficient to cover more than 10,000 workplaces. Penalties were not sufficient to deter violations.

Foreign workers, especially domestic workers, remained vulnerable to exploitative conditions. For example, the law does not legally entitle foreign female domestic workers to the same wages as Syrian domestic workers. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor is in charge of regulating employment agencies responsible for providing safe working conditions for migrant domestic workers, but the scope of oversight was unknown. The continued unrest resulted in the large-scale voluntary departure of foreign workers as demand for services significantly declined, but violence and lawlessness impeded some foreign workers from leaving the country.